THE MASTER PASSION

Stories by Guy de Maupassant
Translated by Marjorie Laurie

BOULE DE SUIF
THE HOUSE OF MADAME TELLIER
A LIFE
YVETTE
BEL-AMI
TALES OF DAY AND NIGHT
MONT-ORIOL
PIERRE AND JEAN
THE MASTER PASSION
NOTRE CŒUR

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By

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

Translated by

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DAYLIGHT descended into the spacious studio through the open roof-window, which formed a great square of dazzling blue, a shining void set against a far-away background of boundless azure, traversed by birds in rapid flight.

Once inside the lofty, ascetic room, with its many hangings, the dancing rays lost their brilliance; subdued and faint, they rested dreamily upon the tapestries, lost themselves in the folds of the curtains, and barely penetrated into the dark corners, where only the gilded picture frames flashed a response.

Peace and repose seemed immured there, but it was the peace which dwells wherever an artist has wrought in travail of soul. These precincts, sacred to human intelligence and human energy, where the mind of man exhausts itself in passionate effort, are invaded, as soon as the creative transport subsides, by an atmosphere of lassitude and exhaustion. The paroxysms of life are succeeded by a semblance of death. Everything in the room is wrapped in slumber; the furniture, the draperies, the unfinished portraits of celebrities, as if the whole studio shared its master's weariness, after labouring with him and bearing its share in the diurnal struggle.

A faintly oppressive odour of paint, turpentine and tobacco hung about the chairs and carpets. No sound troubled the brooding silence, save the shrill twitter of the swallows as they flew past the open skylight, and the confused, unceasing murmur of Paris, barely audible above the housetops. All was still, save for the little blue clouds of smoke, rising intermittently from the cigarette which Oliver

Bertin, lying full length on his divan, was lazily puffing. His gaze lost in the distant sky, he was endeavouring to find a subject for a picture. As yet he had not the faintest idea what it was to be.

He was not one of those robust, self-confident artists. Of diffident temperament, his restless genius hovered undecided amid the infinite manifestations of art. Wealth, fame, every possible distinction had fallen to his lot; and yet, towards the close of his career, he still wavered, unable to decide towards which ideal he had striven. He had won the *Prix de Rome;* champion of tradition, he had, like so many of his predecessors, depicted famous scenes from history. Later he had modernised his style, and painted living men and women, still, however, clinging to the classical manner. Clever, enthusiastic, despite his unstable ideals a steady worker, devoted to his art, which he understood to admiration, he had, thanks to his subtle intelligence, attained remarkable technique, while he owed something of his surprising versatility to his unsettled habit of mind and his experiments in every branch of painting.

Possibly the sudden vogue of his early works, with their classic refinement and distinction, had warped his natural bent and hindered his normal development. Ever since his first triumph, he had been unconsciously influenced by a desire for popularity, which had secretly biassed him and undermined his real convictions. This eagerness to please manifested itself, moreover, in a diversity of forms, which contributed greatly to his renown. His charm of manner, his personal habits, his cult of the body, his youthful reputation as a swordsman and horseman, added little flashes of notoriety to the lustre of his steadily increasing fame.

After the exhibition of his Cleopatra, the first picture to bring him fame, all Paris was at his feet. He was welcomed and fêted everywhere. In a moment he had become one of that brilliant set of fashionable artists who frequent the Bois, who are coveted by rival hostesses, and to whom, young as they are, the Institute opens its doors. He had passed through those portals in triumph, while all Paris applauded.

The spoilt darling of fortune, he had come by smooth paths to the threshold of age.

Under the influence of the glorious weather in which the outer world was basking, he was trying to hit upon some subject of romantic interest. His luncheon and his cigarette had made him slightly drowsy. He gazed dreamily into space, tracing upon the azure background fugitive forms; fair women in some drive of the Bois, or on some street pavement; lovers by the water's edge: all the sprightly scenes on which his fancy delighted to dwell. In glowing hallucinations of vision these images, vague, changing, fleeting, were printed upon the sky, while the swallows seemed bent on effacing them, as with strokes of a pen, as they swept through the air like an endless flight of arrows.

His efforts were fruitless. The shadowy shapes resembled work he had already produced; the women that hovered before his eyes were the sisters and daughters of earlier creations of his artistic fancy. This review of his past achievements, this sterility, this dearth of new ideas, brought home to him the vague fear that had haunted him during the past year, the dread of having exhausted his powers and his range of subjects, of having drained his sources of inspiration.

He rose languidly and looked through his portfolios of half-finished sketches, in the hope of finding something to stimulate his ideas.

Still smoking his cigarette he began to turn over a collection of rough drawings, sketches and studies which he kept in a large antique cupboard. Soon he was weary of this futile quest; his mind felt crippled and jaded. Throwing away his cigarette and whistling a popular air he stooped down, and picked up from under a chair a heavy bar-bell. With his free hand, he drew aside a curtain from a mirror, which he used for correcting a pose, verifying a perspective, and in general for tests of accuracy. Standing in front of the mirror he watched his practice with the bar-bell.

Among his brother artists he had been noted for his strength, and afterwards, in society, for his beauty. But

he was beginning to feel the weight of his years. Tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, he was, like most elderly athletes, beginning to put on flesh, although he still fenced every day and frequently went for rides. His head was as fine and as distinguished as ever, though there were changes. His short, wiry, white hair showed up his dark eyes beneath their thick grey brows. There was hardly a grey hair in his luxuriant moustache, the dashing moustache of a veteran soldier, which lent to his face a look of singular pride and vigour.

Standing erect before the mirror, with his heels together, he went through the usual exercises, watching complacently the easy, powerful play of his muscular arms, as they wielded the cast-iron weight. Suddenly in the depths of the glass, which reflected the whole of the studio, he saw a curtain stir and then a woman's head peeping in through the door.

"Anyone at home?" said a voice behind him.

"Present," he replied, turning round.

Dropping his bar-bell on the carpet, he ran to the door with somewhat fictitious agility.

A woman in a light-coloured frock entered, and they shook hands.

"You were doing exercises," she remarked.

"Yes, I was peacocking in front of the glass and you caught me at it."

She laughed.

"There was no one in the porter's room, and as I know you are always alone at this time of the day, I came in unannounced."

He gazed at her.

"By Jove, how lovely you look, and what a frock!"

"Yes, it's a new one. Do you like it?"

"It is charming, a perfect symphony. Really, nowadays people have an instinct for the subtleties of colour."

He walked all round her, fingering the material of her gown, deftly rearranging a fold here and there with all the

skill of a man who knows as much about dress as a professional cutter, having dedicated his whole life, his artist's brain, his athlete's muscles, to interpreting, by means of his brush, all the subtle changes of fashion, all the charms of women, concealed and imprisoned in sheaths of silk and velvet, and under the foam of snowy laces.

"It's a great success," he said at last, "it suits you admirably."

She accepted his tribute with a pleasing sense of her own beauty and of his appreciation. She was of medium height and somewhat full figure, and though no longer in her first youth, was still handsome, possessing that bloom and brilliance which lends to a beauty of forty summers the charm of maturity. She was like a rose, which continues to spread its petals until, over-blown, it falls to ruin in a single instant. Crowned with fair tresses, she had the vivid and youthful charm of those daughters of Paris who never grow old; who are endowed with amazing vitality and inexhaustible reserves of strength, and remain unchanged for a score of years, proof against the ravages of time, setting the cult of the body and the care of their health above every other interest.

Raising her veil, she murmured:

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"I have been smoking."

"How horrid!" Then she offered him her mouth. "Never mind," she said. And their lips met.

He took her umbrella and removed her light jacket, with the swift, deft movements indicating frequent practice. As she seated herself on the divan, he asked with genuine interest,

"How is your husband?"

"Very well, thank you. At this very moment, I expect, he is speaking in the Chamber."

"What about?"

"Beetroot or colza, as usual, no doubt."

Her husband, Count de Guilleroy, was Deputy for Eure, and had specialised in all agricultural questions.

Catching sight of a sketch which she had not seen before, she crossed the studio to look at it.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A pastel I have just begun, a portrait of Princess de Pontève."

"You know," she said solemnly, "if you start painting portraits of women again, I shall shut up your studio. I know too well where that sort of thing leads."

"Oh," he replied, "one hasn't the luck to find a subject like you twice."

"I should hope not."

She examined the pastel with the air of a connoisseur, looking at it first from a distance, then close to, shading her eyes with her hand, and experimenting with it until she had placed it in the most favourable light. Then she expressed her approval.

"It is very good. You are very successful with pastels."

"Do you really think so?" he said, much gratified.

"Yes, it's a delicate art, and requires a master's touch. It's impossible for a prentice hand."

For the last twelve years she had fostered his tendency towards refinement in art, resisting his reactionary impulses towards simplicity and realism. Influenced by social and worldly considerations, she had tactfully guided him towards an ideal of somewhat artificial and sophisticated beauty.

"Tell me about the princess," she said.

To satisfy the subtle and jealous curiosity of the feminine mind, he had to relate to her a thousand trifling details about the princess, beginning with her gowns and ending with her mental qualities.

"Does she flirt with you?" she broke in.

"Certainly not," he assured her, laughing.

Placing both hands on Bertin's shoulders, she gazed at him intently. In her eager interrogation, the pupils of her eyes dilated and contracted in the middle of the blue iris, which was flecked with infinitesimal black dots, like specks of ink.

Again she murmured,

"Really and truly, doesn't she flirt with you?"

"No, really and truly."

"In any case," she added, "I don't care. You will never love anyone now but me. As far as other women are concerned it's all over. It's too late now, my poor dear."

He was conscious of a slight feeling of discomfort, such as chills the heart of a man of ripe years when an allusion is made to his age.

"Yesterday, to-day, to-morrow," he replied, "there never has been, and there never will be, anyone but you, Annie, in my life."

She took his arm and returning to the divan, drew him down beside her.

"What were you thinking about?"

"A subject for a picture."

"What sort of a subject?"

"I don't know. That's what I was trying to discover."

"What have you been doing these last few days?"

She made him tell her all about the visits he had received, the dinners and receptions he had attended, and all the talk and gossip he had heard.

Both of them were interested in the thousand and one minute and commonplace incidents of the fashionable world. Their minds were merged and steeped in that troubled and turbid stream of Paris society, that compound of petty jealousies, of liaisons, known or suspected, of cut and dried opinions concerning the same persons, events, and topics, that have been repeated *ad infinitum*. They knew everyone in all the different cliques. To him as an artist, to her as the brilliant wife of a Conservative Deputy, all doors were open. Both excelled in that essentially French art of small-talk; brilliant, frivolous, good-humouredly malicious, idly witty, superficially refined, and essentially vulgar, which confers an enviable distinction on those whose tongues have caught the trick of this airy persiflage.

"When will you come to dinner?" she asked.

"Whenever you like. Name your day."

"Well, then, Friday. I have asked the Duchess de

Mortemain, the Corbelles and Monsieur de Musadieu, to celebrate my little girl's return. She is coming home that evening. But do not tell anyone. It is a secret."

"I shall be delighted to come. I am dying to see Annette again. It is three years since we met."

"So it is."

After spending her early childhood in Paris with her parents, Annette had become the cherished darling of Madame Paradin, her grandmother, who was almost blind and lived all the year round on her son-in-law's estate, the Château of Roncières, in Eure. The old lady had gradually claimed more and more of the child's company, and as the Guilleroys spent nearly half the year at Roncières, whither their many different interests, agricultural and political, summoned them, they ended by never taking Annette back with them to Paris, except for brief visits. The child herself preferred her free and active existence in the country to the cloistered seclusion of her life in town. It was now three years since she had set foot in Paris. The Countess had thought it advisable to keep her away entirely, for fear of awakening in her prematurely a taste for society. Madame de Guilleroy had provided her with two highly qualified governesses and, as time went on, she paid more and more frequent visits to her mother and her daughter, whose presence at the château had, indeed, become almost a necessary condition of the old lady's happiness.

At one time Oliver Bertin had spent six or seven weeks every summer at Roncières. But for the last three years he had been obliged to undergo a cure for rheumatism, and his sojourn in remote watering places had so intensified his passion for Paris, that when he returned home he could never tear himself away again.

Properly speaking, Annette's return to Paris had been fixed for the autumn. But a scheme for a brilliant match had suddenly occurred to her father, who sent for her at once, so that she might lose no time in making the acquaintance of her proposed husband, the Marquis de Farandal. This scheme of his, however, was kept a close secret, and

Oliver Bertin was the only person to whom Madame de Guilleroy had confided it.

"Then your husband has quite made up his mind?"

"Yes, and I think it's an excellent idea."

They dropped the subject and returned to questions of art. She tried to persuade him to undertake a Christ, but he rejected the suggestion and said that the subject had been treated often enough. Nevertheless, she clung pertinaciously to her idea.

"Oh, if only I could draw and show you my conception," she exclaimed impatiently. "It is very original and very daring. It's an idea for a Descent from the Cross. The man, who has released the Saviour's hands, lets the upper part of the body fall forward. It sinks down upon the bystanders, who raise their arms to receive it. Do you see what I mean?"

He assented and admitted the originality of her idea. But he was in a vein of modernity, and as he watched his beloved reclining on the divan, and dangling one lightly-shod foot in a diaphanous stocking that betrayed the bare flesh beneath, he exclaimed:

"Now, there's a splendid subject; there's real life for you: a woman's foot peeping out from beneath the hem of her gown. What truth, desire, romance, it could be made to express! What more gracious and charming than a woman's foot, with its suggestion of mystery, of limbs, veiled beneath those draperies and revealed to the imagination alone?"

Seating himself cross-legged on the floor, he seized her shoe and removed it; released from its leather sheath her foot moved like a little restless animal unexpectedly set free. "How exquisite, how distinguished, how sensuous—more sensuous even than a hand. Let me see your hand, Annie."

She was wearing long gloves that reached to the elbow. She seized one glove by the top edge, swiftly drew it off inside out, as one strips the skin from a snake, and revealed her round white, shapely arm, which evoked in its sudden nakedness the idea of complete and audacious nudity.

She held out her hand, letting it droop from the wrist. Rings glittered on her ivory fingers; her rosy nails, manicured to a sharp point, looked like tiny adorable claws, at the end of an exquisite little feminine paw.

Oliver Bertin fondled it admiringly, playing with the fingers as if they were toys of flesh and blood.

"What a funny little object!" he murmured. "What a funny little object! So exquisite, so skilful, so clever, able to do so many different things, write books, build houses and pyramids, make lace and engines and piecrust, and lavish caresses, which after all is what it was really meant for."

One by one he drew off all her rings, and as he came to the thin hoop of plain gold, he said with a smile:

"The Law. Hats off to the Law!"

"Silly," she replied, a little vexed.

Always possessed of a mocking spirit, that tendency, characteristically French, to mingle a hint of irony with the most solemn sentiments, he would often, in all innocence, hurt her feelings, in his failure to grasp the subtle distinctions dear to the feminine mind, and to realise when he was trespassing on holy ground. And she was especially wounded when he alluded with a touch of familiar ribaldry to their intimacy, which, he protested, had lasted so long that it was the finest example of fidelity afforded by the Nineteenth Century.

After a pause she said:

"Will you take Annette and me round with you on Varnishing Day?"

"I shall be delighted."

She asked his opinion as to the best pictures to be exhibited in the next Salon, which would open in a fortnight's time. Then suddenly, as if she had just remembered an engagement, she exclaimed:

"Well, give me back my shoe. I must go."

He was dreamily playing with it, turning it over and over in his hands. Bending down, he kissed the foot which,

perfectly still now, and rather cold, hovered between dress and carpet.

Then he put the shoe on again.

Madame de Guilleroy rose and went to the writing table, which was strewn with papers, open letters, old and new, and an ink pot, a characteristic painter's ink pot with all its contents dried up. She surveyed the table with an inquisitive glance, and fingered the pile of letters, turning them over to see what lay beneath.

"You will get my litter into such a muddle," he protested, moving towards her.

She made no reply.

"Who is it who wants to buy your *Girls Bathing?*"

"Some American. I don't know him."

"Have you accepted the offer for the *Street Singer?*"

"Yes. Ten thousand francs."

"You were wise. It's charming enough, but nothing out of the way. Good-bye, my dear."

She offered him her cheek, which he lightly touched with his lips.

"Friday at eight o'clock," she said softly. "No, you are not to see me downstairs. You know I never let you. Good-bye."

She vanished through the curtains.

As soon as she had gone, he lighted another cigarette and began slowly to pace the studio while he reviewed the whole history of their intimacy in the past. Little, long-forgotten incidents he summoned back to his mind, tracking them down and linking one to the other, intent on this solitary hunt after vanished memories.

It began just as his star was rising above the horizon of artistic Paris, at a time when painters stood first in the good graces of the public and lived regally, in a domain of splendid mansions of which the entrée had been won for them by a few strokes of the brush.

For several years after his return from Rome in 1864, Bertin had attained neither reputation nor fame, but after the exhibition of his *Cleopatra*, in 1868, he had been exalted

to the skies by both critics and public, in the space of a few days.

In 1872, after the War, when Henri Regnault's death had served his brother painters as a stepping-stone to fame, Bertin's *Jocasta,* a sufficiently daring choice of subject, had ranged him with the more venturesome spirits, while the discreet originality of his treatment secured to him at the same time the approval of even the academic school. In 1873, on his return from a visit to Africa, a first medal awarded to his *Jewess of Algiers* had raised him above rivalry.

In 1874, after his portrait of *Princess de Salia,* society had acclaimed him as the foremost portrait painter of the day. From that moment onwards he became the favourite artist of all the women in Paris, collectively and individually. They considered him the most skilful and subtle interpreter of their charm, their elegance, their character. In a month or two every woman of distinction in Paris was imploring him to paint her. He showed himself fastidious, and asked a high price for his work.

He had become the fashion, and was received everywhere. One day, when he was calling on the Duchess de Mortemain, he saw a lady dressed in deep mourning, who was leaving the room just as he arrived. As they met in the doorway, he received a dazzling impression of youth and charm and elegance.

He asked her name, and was told that she was the Countess de Guilleroy, wife of a Norman country gentleman, a Deputy, devoted to agricultural interests; that she was in mourning for her father-in-law, and much sought after, both for her beauty and wit.

"Now there's a woman I should like to paint," he exclaimed, still thrilled by this vision which had so stirred his artistic senses.

The next day this remark was repeated to the youthful Countess, and the same evening he received a note written on faintly perfumed blueish paper, in a delicate regular hand, sloping slightly upwards from left to right.

"Dear Sir,

The Duchess de Mortemain has just been here and tells me that you would like to make my unworthy features the subject of one of your masterpieces. I should be delighted to give you the opportunity, if I were sure that you meant it seriously and had really discerned in me some quality which you could reproduce and idealise.

With kind regards,

Yours truly,

ANNE DE GUILLEROY."

He replied by asking when he might call on the Countess, and was invited informally to luncheon on the following Monday.

The Guilleroys' flat was on the first floor of a spacious and luxurious modern house in the Boulevard Malesherbes. He was ushered through a large drawing-room decorated with panels of blue silk in a framework of white and gold, into a boudoir, which was hung with gay, fantastic, eighteenth century tapestries in the style of Watteau, those tapestries, so delicately tinted, so graciously conceived, as if the minds that imagined, the hands that wrought them, had laboured in a dream of love.

As he was seating himself, the Countess entered. So light were her steps that he had not heard her passing through the adjoining room. Her appearance took him by surprise. She shook hands with him with graceful familiarity.

"Then it's really true," she said, "that you would care to paint my portrait."

"I should be very happy if you would allow it, Countess."

She looked very young and slender in her clinging black gown, which lent to her a seriousness belied by her smiling face and her sunny hair. The Count came in, hand-in-hand with a little girl of six.

Madame de Guilleroy introduced her husband. He was a small man and had something of the look of a priest or an actor, with his hollow cheeks, where the roots of his closely

shaven beard showed dark beneath the skin, his long hair, tossed off his forehead, his courteous manner, and the deep parentheses which his habit of public speaking had graved around his mouth.

He expressed his thanks to the artist with a redundant eloquence which betrayed the orator. He had long wished to have his wife's portrait painted, and his choice would certainly have fallen on Monsieur Oliver Bertin, had he not feared a refusal, for he was aware that the painter was besieged by applicants.

After much interchange of compliments, it was agreed that the Count should bring his wife to Bertin's studio the very next day. He questioned, however, whether, as she was in deep mourning, it would not be advisable to defer the sittings, but the artist was anxious to record his first impression and the striking contrast between her brilliant and exquisite face, lit up by her golden hair, and the austerity of her black gown.

The next day, accordingly, she came to the studio with her husband; and on subsequent visits with her little girl, who was deposited in a chair at a table covered with picture books.

Oliver Bertin treated the Countess with extreme reserve, as was his custom. Knowing very little about them, he instinctively distrusted society women. He believed them to be at once artful and silly, hypocritical and dangerous, feather-headed and exacting. With women of the demi-monde, he had had various swift successes, thanks to his fame as an artist, his playful wit, his handsome athletic figure, and his dark and manly countenance. He preferred their company and shared their taste for free and easy talk and manners, being used to the careless, rollicking ways of studios and green-rooms, where he felt at home. He went into society more for the sake of being lionised than for pleasure. His vanity was gratified, compliments and commissions were showered upon him, and he showed off to all the fair ladies who flattered him, but made no attempt to pay court to them. As he never ventured upon a risky

joke or a piquant story in their presence, he considered them prudish, while they thought him very good form.

Whenever one of these society butterflies posed for him, in spite of her efforts to captivate him, he remained conscious of that fundamental distinction which hinders the fusion of the artistic and fashionable elements of society, however close they may draw together. Beneath the smiles, beneath the admiration which, in the case of women, is always tinged with insincerity, he was ever sensible of that suggestion of mental reserve, innate in those who regard themselves as superior beings. His pride was at once up in arms. His manner became distant, almost haughty. With the secret vanity of the upstart, who is treated as an equal by princes and princesses, he combined the arrogance of a man whose genius has won for him a position to which others attain by birth.

"He is extremely well-bred," people remarked with a hint of surprise, which ruffled while it flattered, for it hinted at barriers.

Madame de Guilleroy was somewhat dismayed by the cold formality with which the artist chose to treat her, and could think of nothing to say to this man of ice, with the reputation for wit.

After her little girl had settled down to her picture books, Madame de Guilleroy would seat herself in an armchair near the sketch at which he was working, and at Bertin's request, try to make her face expressive.

In the middle of the fourth sitting, he suddenly broke off.

"What do you enjoy most in life?" he asked.

"I really don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Because I want a happy expression in your eyes, and I have never seen one there yet."

"Well, try to make me talk. I love talking."

"Are you a very cheerful person?"

"Yes, very."

"Well, Countess, let us talk." This was spoken in tones of deep solemnity.

Resuming his work, he touched on various topics, endeavouring to discover some point of contact. They began by discussing their common acquaintances, and then they proceeded to talk about themselves, the most interesting and enthralling subject of all.

The next day they felt more at ease, and aware that he charmed and amused her, Bertin told her stories of his life as an artist, enlivening his reminiscences with a characteristic whimsicalness.

Accustomed to the sedateness of the literary men she met in society, she was surprised by his irresponsible brilliance, his frankness, his illuminating flashes of irony, but soon she found herself replying in the same vein, with graceful audacity. Within a week she had completely captivated him with her sweet temper and her open and ingenuous nature. All his prejudices against society women were forgotten, and he was ready to maintain that they alone possessed charm and spirit.

All the time he was painting her, now standing in front of the canvas, now retreating and advancing like a boxer in the ring, he kept uttering his inmost thoughts, as if he had known her for years, this bewitching woman, half light, half darkness, half sunshine, half gloom, who sat for him, listening and laughing and replying to him so merrily, so vivaciously, that she was continually losing the pose. Sometimes he would move away from her, and, closing one eye, stoop down in order to obtain a general impression of his model; then he would come near her to observe the minutest variations, the most transitory expressions on her face, to capture and interpret that mysterious quality which transcends mere superficial beauty, that emanation of ideal loveliness, that glimpse of the unknown, that secret and compelling charm, peculiar to the individual, which rouses in one man the most passionate love, while leaving another indifferent.

One afternoon the little girl planted herself in front of the canvas, and said with the deep solemnity of a child:

"That's my Mamma, isn't it?"

Charmed with this ingenuous tribute to the success of his work, he caught her in his arms and kissed her.

Another day she seemed very quiet, and presently a mournful little voice remarked:

"Mamma, I'm tired of this."

Oliver was so much touched by this, her first complaint, that next day he had a whole shopful of toys brought to the studio, to Annette's surprise and delight. She arranged all the toys with the deepest care and thought, and played with each of them in turn as the spirit moved her. From that day she bestowed upon Oliver that flattering and spontaneous devotion which makes children so sweet and winning.

Madame de Guilleroy was beginning to enjoy her sittings. As she was in mourning that winter she hardly knew what to do with herself. Debarred from all social gaieties, she looked upon her visits to Bertin's studio as her one interest in life.

Her father, who had been dead some years, had been a very wealthy merchant in Paris, much given to hospitality, and her mother being a confirmed invalid, who spent six months of the year in bed, Anne had become at an early age an accomplished hostess, perfectly at home in the world, adaptable, keen-eyed, trained to receive, smile, talk, discriminate, and say the right word to everyone.

When Count de Guilleroy was proposed to her as her future husband, she was quick to recognise of her own accord the advantages of the match, realising, like a sensible girl, that one cannot have everything, and that in every situation one has to strike a balance between the favourable and unfavourable aspects.

Once launched into society, she was sought after chiefly for the sake of her wit and beauty, and though many men paid court to her, not one of them caused her a single flutter; her heart remained as undisturbed as her mind.

At the same time she amused herself with discreet flirtations, in which she showed herself at once prudent and venturesome. She was fond of admiration, and it gratified her vanity to know that she had kindled a passion, as long

as she could pretend to ignore it. After an evening spent in absorbing the incense of flattery, she always slept the sleep of a woman who has fulfilled her mission in life.

Seven years of this existence, though it had neither wearied nor bored her, for she still delighted in the perpetual whirl of society, had none the less aroused in her an occasional desire for other interests.

The men of her circle, lawyers engaged in politics, financiers, idle men about town, had for her something of the artificial interest of actors in a play. She did not take them too seriously, although she had a proper respect for their office, position, and titles.

Oliver Bertin had for her at first all the charm of novelty. She enjoyed herself very much in his studio, which rang with her laughter; she felt that she sparkled, and she was grateful to him for the pleasure these visits gave her. His good looks, his strength, and his artistic fame were further attractions, for whether they admit it or not, women are never indifferent to reputation and physical beauty. Flattered by the expert's choice of herself, disposed to judge him favourably in return, she discerned in him a vigorous and cultured mind, subtlety and imagination, real intellectual charm and a picturesque turn of phrase, which seemed to lend a brilliance to her own utterances.

Their intimacy ripened swiftly, and their daily handclasps at her arrival hinted at an ever increasing emotion. At last, without counting the cost, with no clear idea of consequences, she yielded to the perfectly natural temptation to bring him to her feet. She had neither foreseen nor planned this. She simply flirted with him, more charmingly than ever, like any other woman when a man has found favour in her sight. With every smile and look and gesture she lured him with that honey of seduction which emanates from a woman who is yearning to be loved. She made him little flattering speeches which meant "I think you charming," and she encouraged him to talk, so that she might lend a sympathetic ear, and show him how much he interested her. Sometimes he would leave his painting

to sit beside her, and abnormally excited by the intoxicating desire to please her, his fancy would run riot in poetry, humour, or philosophy, according to his mood. When he was merry, she laughed with him; when he turned to deeper subjects, she tried, not always with success, to follow his line of thought, and even when her mind was far away, she preserved an appearance of such devout attention, such complete understanding, such delight in this initiation, that he was enraptured at the sight of her listening to him; thrilled at his discovery of a mind so keen, receptive and docile, where an idea germinated like a seed.

The portrait was progressing and promised to be very successful, the painter having attained the requisite pitch of emotion for discerning all the qualities of his model, and interpreting them with that ardour and sincerity which inspire the true artist. Leaning towards her, intently watching every movement of her face, every tint, every shadow upon her skin, every glance of her liquid eyes, every secret of her countenance, he drank in her personality as a sponge absorbs water. As he transferred to his canvas the emanation of that distracting charm which his eyes imbibed and which flowed like a current from his mind to his brush, his senses were stolen away as if he had drunk deep draughts of woman's magic.

She saw that he was falling in love with her; the game amused her, and growing more and more sure of victory, she caught a spark of the same fire. She was conscious of a new sensation, which lent fresh zest to life, and inspired her with mysterious happiness. Whenever his name was mentioned, her heart would give a little flutter, and she had an impulse—one of those impulses, instantly repressed—to exclaim: "He is in love with me." She was delighted when people praised his art, and still more so, perhaps, when they admired his looks. When she was alone, and safe from curious glances, she contrived to persuade herself that she had gained a true friend, one who would never ask more of her than an amicable handclasp.

Often in the middle of a sitting, Oliver would lay down his

palette on his stool, catch little Annette in his arms, and tenderly kiss her eyes or hair, with a glance at her mother, as if to say:

"They are meant for you, these kisses, not for the child."

Now and then, Madame de Guilleroy came alone to the studio without her daughter. On these occasions there was very little painting, but all the more conversation.

One cold afternoon at the end of February, she was late for her appointment. Oliver had come home early, as he invariably did when he was expecting her, for he always hoped she might arrive before her proper time. While he waited for her, he paced the studio, smoking, and, to his own surprise, found himself confronted again with a question which he had asked himself scores of times during the preceding week.

"Am I in love with her?"

He had nothing to guide him, for hitherto he had never experienced real passion. Passing fancies he had known, ardent enough and not always brief, but he had never mistaken them for genuine love. He was amazed at this new emotion which possessed him.

Did he love her? he mused. He scarcely desired her; for he had never dreamed of the possibility that he might win her. Hitherto, whenever a woman charmed him, a sudden desire for possession came over him, and he stretched out his hand to pluck the fruit; yet his inmost feelings had never been deeply stirred either by a woman's absence or by her presence.

The element of desire had hardly entered into his feelings for this particular woman; it seemed to be concealed and ambushed behind another and mightier emotion, which was as yet but half divined, half awake. Oliver had always supposed that love had its beginning in dreams and romantic exaltation. But this thing, that he was now experiencing, seemed to spring from some indescribable emotion, which was certainly more physical than mental. He felt nervous, restless and tense, as if on the brink of some illness. Yet

there was nothing painful in this fever that coursed through his veins and seemed to have infected his mind as well.

He was aware that Madame de Guilleroy was at the bottom of the trouble; that it rose from his memories of her visits and his yearning for her return.

No irresistible impulse of his whole being urged him towards her, but he felt her presence within him, as if she had never left him. When she went away, she bequeathed to him something of herself, subtle and elusive. Could this be love? He plunged deep into his own heart, determined to probe and to solve the mystery. He thought her charming, but she did not correspond to the ideal woman his blind fancy had created, Every man, who looks for love, has a preconceived idea of the moral and physical qualities of his future enchantress, and much as he admired her, Madame de Guilleroy did not seem to him to satisfy these conceptions. Then why did she thus continually obsess him as no other woman had ever done? Was he simply caught in the toils of a coquette whose wiles he had long since divined and penetrated; had he fallen a victim to her schemes, to that peculiar fascination which springs from a woman's natural instinct to captivate and charm?

He walked about the room, sat down, got up again, lighting and tossing away cigarette after cigarette, and he kept looking at the hand of the clock, moving so slowly, so deliberately towards the hour of the appointment. More than once he was tempted to flick open the convex glass which protected the face of the clock and to push on the long gold hand till it touched the hour which it was approaching so sluggishly. It seemed to him that he had only to do this, for the door to open to admit her for whom he waited, and whom he had tricked by this artifice into coming before her time. Then he smiled at the childish absurdity of this impulse.

"Could I ever hope to be her lover?" he wondered at last. The idea seemed to him strange and fantastic; impracticable, too, because of the complications which such a

relationship would introduce into his life. Yet undoubtedly this woman had a great charm for him.

"I'm certainly in a very queer state," he concluded. The clock striking the hour startled him, though it was his nerves, rather than his mind, that were affected. He waited for her with the impatience, which is aggravated by every additional moment of delay. She was always punctual. Within the next ten minutes, then, he would see her enter the studio. But ten minutes passed and he felt a premonition of disaster. Then he grew vexed with her for wasting his time. Suddenly he realised that if she did not come, it would cause him real pain. What should he do? Wait for her? Certainly not. He would go out, so that if she arrived very late for her appointment, she would find the studio deserted. Very well, he would go out. But how soon? How much grace should he allow her? Perhaps it would be better to stay in and to give her to understand in a few words of frigid politeness, that he would not stand such treatment. But supposing she never came at all? In that case she would certainly send a telegram or a note by a servant or special messenger. And if she did not come, what should he do with himself? It would be a wasted day; he would never be able to settle down to work. What then? Why then he would go and enquire after her, for see her he must.

There it was. He was obsessed, he was tortured by his aching longing to see her. Could this be love? But he experienced no soaring of the spirit, no rapture of the senses, no dreaminess of the soul. All he knew was, that if she did not come that day he would suffer grievously.

The front door bell echoed on the stairs of Bertin's little house. Oliver caught his breath; then, in his joy, he spun round on his toes and tossed away his cigarette.

She entered. She was alone.

He had a sudden impulse of daring.

"Do you know what I was wondering while I was waiting for you?"

"No, I haven't an idea."

"I was wondering whether I was not in love with you."

"In love with me? How absurd!"

But she smiled, and her smile said:

"How sweet of you! I am simply delighted."

"Come," she resumed, "you're not in earnest. Why do you make such jokes?"

"On the contrary, I am very much in earnest. I do not positively say that I am in love with you. I am merely wondering if I am not well on the way."

"What makes you think so?"

"My restlessness when you are absent, my joy when you come again."

She sank into a chair.

"Don't let a trifle like that worry you; as long as you sleep well and enjoy your dinner, you're not in any danger."

He laughed.

"And if my sleep and my appetite fail me?"

"Let me know."

"And then?"

"Then I'll leave you in peace till you recover."

"Thank you kindly."

They spent the whole afternoon sentimentalising on this subject of love. This philandering continued for several successive days. She chose to treat the whole affair as an amusing subject for her wit, and as soon as she entered the studio she would say gaily:

"And how is your love to-day?"

With playful gravity he would describe to her the course of the disease, the secret, unremitting, deep-seated pangs of this ripening passion. He would give her a minute analysis of his feelings hour by hour since their parting on the previous day, burlesquing the manner of a professor delivering a lecture. And she would listen to him intently, not without emotion, as if touched by a story in a book, of which she was the heroine. When he had rehearsed, with a sprightly air of gallantry, all the pains that racked him, his voice would falter now and then, and a word, or a mere inflection, would suggest an aching heart.

Thrilling with curiosity she would question him, her eyes fixed on his, her ears eager for these confessions which troubled her a little, even while they charmed her.

Sometimes when he came close to her to adjust her pose, he would seize her hand to kiss it. But she would hastily snatch it from his lips and say with a slight frown:

"Go back to your work."

He would obey, but five minutes later she would adroitly ask him some question which brought him back to the one subject that absorbed them both. Meanwhile she began to be haunted by an increasing uneasiness. She wanted to be loved, but in moderation. Sure of her own self-restraint, she feared to let him venture too far, lest she should be forced to crush the hopes that she had seemingly encouraged, and thus lose him for ever. If she had to renounce this pleasant, sentimental friendship, these conversations which flowed so smoothly, freighted with tiny particles of love, like a stream whose sands are full of gold, the wrench would be violent and painful.

When she set out for the studio she felt buoyant and gay, flooded with vivid and glowing happiness. As she rang the bell at Oliver's door, her heart beat with impatience, and the carpet on the stairs seemed strangely soft and caressing beneath her feet.

Oliver, however, was growing moody and nervous and was often irritable. He had flashes of impatience, instantly repressed, but frequent none the less.

One day when she came in, instead of beginning to paint, he sat down beside her.

"Countess," he said. "You must realise now that it is no laughing matter and that I love you to distraction."

Alarmed by this beginning, and recognising that the crisis she had dreaded was at hand, she tried to stop him, but he would not listen to her. The pent-up passion in his heart burst its bounds; pale and trembling with apprehension, she could not but hear him. Asking nothing of her, he spoke for a long time, tenderly, sadly, in tones of despairing resignation; she let him take her hands and keep them clasped in

his own. Before she was aware, he was kneeling at her feet, beseeching her with distraught glances not to hurt him. Hurt him? How? She did not understand. She refused to understand. At the sight of his suffering she felt an agony of pity but an agony that was almost bliss. Suddenly she saw tears in his eyes, and was so deeply moved that she gave a little moan and was ready to clasp him in her arms, like a weeping child.

"Ah, how you torture me!" he murmured very low.

At this, conquered by his pain, quivering in every nerve, and catching the contagion of his tears, she burst into sobs, while her arms trembled to enfold him. When she felt his arms around her, his passionate kisses on her lips she tried to cry out and resist, but she knew that she was lost, and even while she protested, she yielded to his embraces.

At first she was overwhelmed and remained with her face hidden in her hands. But suddenly she started to her feet, picked up her hat from the carpet, put it on, and fled, in spite of Oliver's entreaties and his efforts to catch her by her gown.

Once in the street, she felt so utterly exhausted that her legs tottered and she almost collapsed on the pavement. She hailed a passing cab and told the man to drive her slowly in any direction he pleased. She tumbled into the carriage, shut the door, and sat far back out of sight. Behind the closed windows she felt that she was alone—alone with her thoughts.

For some minutes she was conscious of nothing but the noise and the jolting of the cab. She gazed with unseeing eyes at everything she passed; houses, omnibuses, people on foot, people in cabs. Her mind was a blank. It was as if she had granted herself a moment's grace, a moment's respite before she dared face the thing that had befallen her. Then, being a woman of vigorous intellect and no coward, she said to herself:

"Here I am . . . . a fallen woman."

For a few more minutes she felt stunned by the horrible conviction of irreparable disaster, like a man who has fallen

from the top of a house and believes his legs to be broken, but at first refuses to move, dreading to learn the truth. Instead, however, of experiencing the crushing agonies she had anticipated and feared, she found that she had emerged from this catastrophe with a heart perfectly serene and untroubled. In spite of the calamity which had overwhelmed her soul, her heart beat as calmly, as quietly, as if it had no share in the utter bewilderment of her spirit.

As if the sound of the words would bring the truth home to her, she said again, out loud:

"Here I am . . . . a fallen woman."

But no physical pang responded to this lament of her conscience.

Lulled by the motion of the cab she postponed for the present the inevitable reflections on this painful situation. She was certainly not unhappy. She was only afraid to think, that was all; afraid to realise, to understand, to face the facts. But, strangely enough, it seemed to her that that obscure and mysterious element, created within us by the conflict between our will and our desire, was incomprehensibly at peace.

After half-an-hour or so of this curious tranquillity, she realised that she was to be spared the agonies she had anticipated. She shook off her languor and said to herself:

"The curious thing is that I hardly feel any regret."

Then she began to take herself to task. She was furious with herself for her own blindness and weakness. She ought to have foreseen all this, realised that the hour of conflict was unavoidable, that she cared sufficiently for this man to debase herself, and that even the most virtuous heart is subject to sudden gusts of passion that sweep away resistance.

After this violent outburst of self-reproach and scorn she thought with a thrill of terror of future developments. Her first impulse was to break with Bertin and never to see him again.

But she had scarcely come to this decision when a thousand objections presented themselves. How should she explain

this breach with him? What should she say to her husband? Would not the truth be suspected, rumoured abroad, repeated everywhere? For the sake of appearances it were wiser perhaps to act in Oliver Bertin's presence a plausible comedy of indifference and forgetfulness, to show him that she had blotted those terrible moments out of her mind and out of her life. But could she carry this through? Was she bold enough to play her part; to pretend to have forgotten the past, to look in indignant surprise at this man, to whose swift, fierce passion she had undoubtedly responded?

After a long debate she decided to adopt this course, which seemed the only one open to her. She resolved to go bravely to the studio the very next day and to make clear to him at once what she expected and demanded of him. No word, not a hint, or look, must ever recall that shameful memory. Doubtless he would suffer, but in course of time he would surely accept the situation like a man of honour and breeding, and would behave in the future in the same way as he had in the past.

As soon as she had arrived at this new decision, she drove home and entered the house, feeling utterly prostrate, conscious of nothing but a desire to go to bed without seeing anyone, to sleep and to forget. She locked herself in her room and until dinner time lay on the sofa, in a dazed condition, refusing to dwell any longer upon this perilous subject. Punctual to the moment she went downstairs to find herself calmly and with unchanged face awaiting her husband. He came in with their little girl in his arms, and she shook hands with him and kissed the child, without a pang of remorse.

Monsieur de Gilleroy asked what she had been doing and she answered carelessly that she had been sitting for her portrait as usual.

"How is it getting on?"

"Very well indeed."

He went on to speak of his own affairs, which he liked discussing during dinner, the business of the Chamber, and the debate on the Bill to prevent adulteration of food. This

evening his conversation, which she generally endured patiently enough, grated upon her nerves, and she was moved to look with closer interest at this commonplace maker of phrases who could absorb himself in such matters. But she listened smiling and replied to all his platitudes with even more than her usual graciousness. As she gazed at him she kept thinking:

"I have been unfaithful to him. He is my husband, and I have been unfaithful to him. How strange it is! Nothing in the world can undo it. Nothing can blot it out! I shut my eyes and for a few moments, a few brief moments, I submitted to the embrace of another man, and I am no longer an honest woman. Only a few instants out of my whole life, a few instants that can never be wiped out, and I have been guilty of an act, which is so trivial, so momentary, yet so irreparable, so serious, the most shameful crime a woman can commit . . . . and I have not the slightest feeling of despair. If someone had foretold this thing yesterday, I should never have believed it. And if I had been convinced that it was to happen, my thoughts would have dwelt on the agonies of remorse which ought to be torturing me to-day. Yet I scarcely feel a single pang."

After dinner Monsieur de Guilleroy went out as usual. The Countess took her little girl on her lap and kissed her and wept over her. Her tears were genuine enough, but they were tears that sprang from her conscience, not from her heart.

But that night she hardly slept at all. In her darkened room she was haunted again by the thought of all the dangers that might arise from Bertin's attitude. She dreaded the next day's interview and the words that she would have to say to him when they met face to face.

She rose early and spent the whole morning on her sofa, endeavouring to foresee every possible danger, preparing her answers, and fortifying herself against every unexpected attack. She left the house early, to give herself time for further thought as she walked to the studio.

Oliver scarcely expected her. For the last twenty-four

hours he had been wondering what he ought to do. After her departure, after her desperate flight, which he had not ventured to oppose, he had remained alone, still hearing long after she had gone, the sound of her footsteps, the rustle of her gown, and the banging of the door which she had slammed in her frantic haste. He had stood there thrilling with deep, intense and fiery joy. He had won her—this woman of all women! Was he dreaming, or was it true? After the first bewildering moments, he tasted the sweetness of his triumph. To enjoy it to the full, he threw himself on his beatified divan. For a long time he reclined there, rapt in the thought that she had become his mistress, that between this woman, whom he had so ardently desired, and himself, had been forged in a few instants that mysterious bond which secretly links two beings together. He recalled with a poignant thrill the swift moment when their lips had met, when their union was accomplished in the throbbing ecstasy of fulfilled desire.

He stayed at home that evening revelling in these thoughts, and went to bed early in a rapture of happiness.

As soon as he awoke the next morning he wondered what he ought to do. To a cocotte or an actress, he would have sent flowers, or perhaps a piece of jewellery. But this unprecedented situation plunged him into agonies of perplexity. He certainly ought to write to her, but what should he say? He scribbled and scratched out; began a dozen letters and tore them all up. Everyone of them seemed to him offensive and crude and absurd. He sought for words of delicacy and charm to utter the gratitude of his soul, his frantic love, his undying devotion. But to describe all these passionate, all these infinitely subtle emotions, he could find only stale phrases and commonplace expressions, at once childish and coarse. At last he gave up all idea of writing to her, and decided to go and see her, immediately after the hour for her sitting had elapsed. He took it for granted that she would not come.

He shut himself up in his studio and lost himself in rapturous contemplation of the portrait, while his lips

tingled with longing to touch this picture, which had borrowed something of her charm. He kept glancing out of the window into the street.

Each glimpse of a petticoat fluttering in the distance set his heart beating. A score of times he thought he recognised her, but when the woman, who had caught his eye, had passed the house, he threw himself into a chair, in bitter disappointment. Suddenly he caught sight of her. Hardly daring to believe his eyes, he seized his opera glasses and made sure of her. Overwhelmed with the violence of his emotion he sank into a chair to await her arrival.

As soon as she entered the room, he fell on his knees and tried to seize her hands, but she snatched them away, and as he remained at her feet, raising his eyes to hers in agony, she said, haughtily:

"What are you doing, Monsieur Bertin? What do you mean by this behaviour?"

"Countess," he faltered, "I implore you . . ."

She broke in upon him ruthlessly.

"Get up. You are making yourself ridiculous."

Utterly bewildered he rose to his feet.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "Why do you treat me like this? You know that I love you."

In a few curt words she conveyed to him her decision, and put the situation upon the footing she desired.

"I don't know what you mean. If you ever mention the word love to me again, I shall leave the studio and never come back. If you forget for one moment the only condition on which I consent to sit to you, you will never see me again."

Aghast at a severity, which he had never for a moment anticipated, he stared at her. Then he understood.

"I shall do your bidding, Countess," he faltered.

"Quite so. It is what I expected of you. And now to work. You are a long time finishing my portrait."

Obediently he took his palette and tried to paint. But his hand shook, and there was a mist before his eyes. He was so deeply hurt that he could have burst into tears.

He tried to talk to her, but she scarcely deigned to reply. When he ventured to praise her complexion, she checked him so harshly that he was suddenly seized by one of those paroxysms of rage which change a lover's devotion to hatred. Body and soul suffered a violent upheaval, and at once, without a moment's warning, he felt that he detested her. Why, it was woman all over. She, too, was like the others. And why not? She was false, fickle and frail like the rest of them. She had lured him on, enticed him with all the tricks of a common wanton, deliberately driving him distracted and then denying him; provoking him, and then refusing him, practising upon him every art of those despicable creatures who madden a man till he is like a dog ranging the streets; who seem ready to fall into his arms, until the moment when they see him panting with desire.

Well, so much the worse for her! Whatever happened, he had once possessed her. In spite of her insolent words, nothing she could do would ever efface those moments from her life. As for him, he would put her out of his mind. It would have been the wildest folly to burden himself with such a mistress, who would have torn his career to pieces to gratify her feminine whims.

He felt inclined to whistle, as he did when painting from professional models; but his nervous excitement was growing upon him, and afraid of making a fool of himself, he pleaded an engagement that brought the sitting to a close.

They parted with a formal bow, both of them firmly convinced that the gulf between them was wider than that first day, when they had met in the Duchess de Mortemain's drawing room.

As soon as she had gone, he seized his hat and overcoat and went out. The sun, shining faintly in a sky of misty blue, flooded the city with a vague radiance, pale and melancholy.

After he had walked straight ahead for some time with angry rapid stride, jostling everyone who got in his way, his fury gradually subsided and gave place to despairing remorse. Still repeating to himself all the hard things he

had said of her, he could not but remember, as he compared her with other women he passed, how fascinating and lovely she was.

Like many men who never confess it, he had always cherished an impossible ideal; dreamed of a love supreme, unique, passionate and romantic, the fulfilment of that vision that mocks the human heart. Surely it had been within his grasp. Surely this woman could have bestowed upon him this almost inconceivable bliss. Why do our dreams never come true? Why may we never clasp that which we follow, or are granted but so much of it as to make the pursuit of our illusion still more tantalising?

His quarrel was no longer with the Countess, but with life itself. Now that he thought of it calmly, what right had he to be angry with her? After all, with what could he reproach her? Only with the sweetness, the kindness, the graciousness she had shown him. She, on the other hand, had every reason to accuse him of behaving like a scoundrel.

He returned home very unhappy. His one desire now was to implore her forgiveness, to devote himself to her, to help her to forget. He wondered what he could do to show her how blindly he would obey her every behest, henceforth, until his dying day.

The next afternoon she came to the studio with Annette. Her smile was so pathetic, her expression so melancholy, that Oliver seemed to read in those piteous blue eyes, that had always been so merry, all the sorrow, remorse and despair of her woman's heart. He was deeply touched. Anxious to distract her, he treated her with the utmost tact and delicacy, and she accepted his attentions with exquisite meekness, with the forlorn and weary manner of a woman in pain.

As he gazed at her he was seized once more by a wild desire to win her love. He could not but wonder that she was not more deeply offended, that, with such a memory between them, she could still return to the studio, listen to him and answer him. If she could bear to see him, hear his

voice and in his presence endure the one inevitable thought, then surely that thought could not cause her intolerable anguish. When a woman hates the man who has injured her, she cannot endure the sight of him, without betraying her hatred. A woman in that position can certainly never again regard him with indifference. She must either detest him or forgive him. And if she can thus forgive him, she is not far from loving him. As he went on deliberately painting, he reasoned the matter out slowly and surely, step by step, till it was all clear to him, and he felt that he was master of the situation. He had only to show himself patient, discreet, devoted, and she would one day fall into his arms again.

So he bided his time. To regain her confidence and win her anew, he manœuvred, just as she had done, disguising his affection under a show of remorse, and offering his hesitating attentions with assumed indifference. Serenely confident of speedy success, he cared but little whether he achieved it to-day or to-morrow. He even took a curious and subtle pleasure in waiting and watching and telling himself that she was afraid of him, as she never came without the child.

He felt that they were slowly drawing together. He noticed a peculiar expression, constrained, and sorrowful and sweet, on the Countess's face. It was the appeal of a soul in travail, of a faltering resolution, ready to have the issue forced.

After a time his attitude of reserve produced its effect, and she began to come to the studio alone again. He now treated her as a friend and comrade, and talked to her of his life, his plans, his art, as if she were his brother. Charmed by his frankness she joyfully adopted the rôle of counsellor; flattered at his choice of her among all other women, she believed that this intellectual intimacy would have a refining influence upon his art. By dint of consulting her and deferring to her judgment, he gently led her to exchange the functions of counsellor for those of high-priestess and oracle. She was gratified at her increasing

influence over the great man and was almost ready to allow him to love her, as an artist whose work she inspired.

At last there came an evening, after a long discussion about the mistresses of famous artists, when she sank into his arms. This time she lay on his breast, unresisting, returning kiss for kiss. After this she felt no pang of remorse, but merely a vague sense of degradation, and she met every reproach of her reason with the conviction that it was fate. Her virgin heart, her starving soul impelled her towards him, her senses were slowly conquered by his caresses, and she came at last to love him with all the devotion of a passionate nature that had never loved before.

Oliver himself was seized by a rapturous passion of love, thrilling, sensuous and romantic. At times he felt as if he had been wafted into the air, until his outstretched arms clasped that glorious and winged dream, which hovers for ever in the heaven of our hopes.

The Countess's portrait was finished and was undoubtedly his best work. He had seen and had captured a glimpse of that mysterious, elusive quality, so seldom given to a painter to reveal, that gleam, that shadow of the soul, which flits across the human face and is gone.

Months and years slipped by with no perceptible slackening of the bond which united the Countess de Guilleroy and Oliver Bertin, the painter. Oliver's first raptures had subsided, and were merged in a deep and placid affection, a kind of amorous friendship, which had become a habit. The Countess's passion, on the other hand, was steadily increasing. She clung to him with the pertinacious devotion of women of a certain type, who give themselves once and for all. Faithful and loyal in their illicit relations, as they might have been in a lawful union, they devote themselves to a love from which nothing can make them swerve. Not only do they love the man of their choice, but it is their will to love him; they have eyes only for him, and their hearts are full of him to the exclusion of every alien thought. They have voluntarily fettered themselves with these bonds,

as a man, who can swim, binds his own hands, before jumping into the water off a bridge to drown himself.

But as soon as the Countess had surrendered herself, she was haunted by doubts of Oliver's constancy. What was there to keep him faithful to her, save his masculine caprice, his fancy, his wayward desire for a woman who had crossed his path one day, as many another had done before? She felt that he was so easily led astray, this lover of hers who lived, after the way of men, free as the air, without duties, scruples, or settled habits. Handsome, distinguished, sought after, he had at the command of his swiftly roused desires all the society women of easy virtue, all the ladies of the demi-monde and the theatre, everyone of them eager to lavish her favours on men like him. Some evening, after a supper party, one of these sirens might follow him home, fascinate him, capture him and keep him.

Living thus in constant dread of losing him, she kept watch on his every look and gesture; in convulsions of terror at a careless word, in agonies if he chanced to admire another woman, or praise a pretty face or a charming gown. She trembled when she thought of all that was concealed from her in his existence, and was aghast at all that she knew. Whenever they met, she had ingenious methods, which he never detected, of eliciting his opinions on different people he had seen, different houses where he had dined, and every trifling impression that flitted through his mind.

As soon as she suspected an alien influence, she fought against it with amazing cunning and a thousand strategies. She had an uncanny faculty for anticipating those brief and casual liaisons of perhaps a week's duration, which are commonplace incidents in the life of every famous artist. She seemed to have a presentiment of approaching danger, even before she was warned of Oliver's new fancy by the gay gleam in his eyes and his expression, as of a man thrilling at the prospect of a romantic adventure.

Then her suffering would begin. Even her sleep was disturbed by torturing doubts. She would try to catch him out by surprise visits to his studio, and ply him with all

sorts of apparently innocent questions, attempting to sound his inmost heart and mind, like a doctor auscultating a patient. When she was alone she wept, convinced that this time he was really lost to her forever, together with that love to which she clung so desperately, because she had brought to it all her strength of will, all her passionate devotion, all her hopes and dreams.

When she realised that he was coming back to her after one of these sudden aberrations, she felt as if she had recovered some precious possession, and in her deep and silent joy, she would sometimes dart into the first church she saw and offer up thanks to God. Her anxiety to please him, to attract him more than any other woman, to defend him against all rivals, made her whole life one continual exploitation of her own charms. In his very presence she fought for him with all the weapons of her beauty, grace and elegance. Whenever he heard her mentioned, she wished him to listen to praises of her charm, her taste, her wit, her gowns. She set herself to charm and fascinate other men so that she might make him at once proud and jealous, and whenever she felt that his jealousy was roused, she would torment him a little, and then gratify his vanity by letting him score some triumph, and so win him back to her. Realising that at any moment a man may meet some woman whose charms are reinforced by novelty, she resorted to other methods. She flattered and petted him, and lapped him in a discreet and continuous flow of compliments; she soothed him with admiration and enveloped him in praises. Thus other friendships, and even other loves, seemed to him somewhat cold and inadequate, and he realised that though other women might care for him as she did, not one of them understood him so well.

Her house, her two drawing-rooms, where he was so frequent a guest, appealed to his artistic vanity as well as to his affections; they became his favourite haunt in the whole of Paris, the one spot where he found the gratification of every whim and passion. Not only did she study all his inclinations, and minister to them, until he received an im-

pression of well-being which he could find in no other house, but she created in him new tastes for every kind of luxury, whether of the body or the emotions, and accustomed him to little attentions, affection, adoration, flattery. She did her utmost to offer to his senses every material seduction, lovely surroundings, perfumes, compliments, exquisite cookery. And in the end, when she had delivered him, spoilt egoistical bachelor that he was, body and soul to the tyranny of a thousand infinitesimal desires; when she was convinced that no other mistress would ever take so much trouble to minister to these needs, to bind him to her by all the tiny graces of life, she saw with dismay that she had made him discontented with his own house and his celibate existence, and that since his visits to her were strictly limited by social conventions, he was seeking at the club and in every other quarter, relief from his loneliness, and she trembled lest his thoughts should turn to marriage.

There were days when these fears became such a torture that she longed for old age to put an end to her sufferings, by leaving her to the enjoyment of a calm and passionless affection.

But the years rolled by, without estranging the lovers. The chain she had forged was strong, and whenever a link showed signs of wear, she renewed it. Yet her mind was never at rest; she watched over Oliver's emotions, as one watches a child crossing a road full of traffic, and always she went in fear of the menace of the unknown, which overshadows the existence of each one of us.

Innocent of the least suspicion of jealousy, the Count regarded as perfectly natural his wife's intimacy with this distinguished artist, who was welcomed everywhere with such deference. They met so often, that in the course of time the two men became friends from mere force of habit.

III

On Friday evening, when Oliver came to dine with the Guilleroys, to celebrate their daughter's home-coming, he found the little Louis XV. drawing-room deserted, except for Monsieur de Musadieu, who had just arrived.

Musadieu was a witty old gentleman, who might have made his mark, and never ceased to deplore his failure. Director of Museums under the Empire, he had succeeded in securing a similar appointment as Inspector of Fine Arts under the Republic, but this in no way prevented him from considering himself first and foremost, the friend of royalty; in fact, of every prince, princess, duke and duchess in the Almanach de Gotha, as well as the sworn patron of artists of every description. Gifted with quick intelligence, ready insight, great fluency in conversation, which enabled him to give a neat turn to the most commonplace remark, an adaptable mind which put him at his ease in every circle of society, the subtle intuition of a diplomatist for taking a man's measure at first sight, he spent all his days and nights wandering from drawing-room to drawing-room, brilliant, loquacious and futile. He seemed to have a turn for everything, and could discuss any subject with an engagingly erudite air, simplifying and elucidating it, to the admiration of all the fashionable ladies, who treated him as a walking encyclopædia of learning. He certainly had a great fund of miscellaneous knowledge, although he had only read the indispensable minimum on any subject. He was on the best of terms with all the members of the five Academies, all the men of science, all the men of letters and all the learned specialists, to whose words he turned a discriminating ear.

He had the knack of immediately forgetting everything too technical or otherwise unsuitable for his little lectures, and of remembering the rest, and he invested the information thus gleaned with an easy, playful lucidity, which rendered it as easy to understand as popular scientific snippets. He produced the impression of an emporium of ideas, one of those huge bazaars which contain nothing of any rarity, but where everything else is to be had, cheap and abundant, of every kind and description, from household requisites to common scientific toys and supplies for the domestic medicine chest.

Painters, with whom his official duties brought him into daily contact, scoffed at him and distrusted him. At the same time he was of service to them, sold their pictures, brought them into touch with society and took a pleasure in introducing, patronising and launching them, as if he had dedicated himself to a secret mission for uniting the world of fashion and the world of art. He plumed himself on his intimacy with both sets, lunching one day with the Prince of Wales, passing through Paris, and dining the same evening with Paul Adelmans, Oliver Bertin and Amaury Maldant.

Bertin, who found him amusing and liked him well enough, said of him, "He is a Jules Verne encyclopædia, bound in ass-skin."

The two men shook hands and fell to discussing the political situation, and the current rumours of war, which Musadieu considered alarming, for excellent reasons which he expressed very ably. It was obviously to Germany's interest to crush us now and to provoke the crisis to which Bismarck had looked forward for the last eighteen years. Bertin, on the other hand, proved by unanswerable arguments that his fears were groundless. Germany would never be so mad as to stake all that she had won on an enterprise of doubtful issue, nor would the Chancellor be rash enough in his old age to risk, on a single throw, his life's work and all his renown.

Monsieur de Musadieu, however, seemed to have private

information which he was unwilling to repeat. He happened to have met one of the Ministers that very day, and on the previous evening he had seen the Grand Duke Vladimir, just back from Cannes. Bertin, however, refused to be convinced; with mild irony he questioned the infallibility of even the best informed politicians. No doubt at the bottom of all these rumours lay some movement on the Stock Exchange. Bismarck was probably the only man in the world whose opinion counted for anything.

Monsieur de Guilleroy came in and shook hands warmly with both of them, apologising effusively for having kept them waiting.

"Well, my dear fellow," said Bertin, "and what do you, as a Deputy, think about these rumours of war?"

Monsieur de Guilleroy embarked on an oration. As a Deputy he had, to be sure, inside information, but he failed to agree with the majority of his associates in the Chamber. No, he did not believe that a conflict was imminent, unless it was provoked by French pugnacity and the rodomontades of self-styled patriots. He gave a sketch of Bismarck in bold outline, after the manner of Saint-Simon. People persisted in misunderstanding the man, because one always attributes to others one's own habit of mind and expects them to act as one would have done oneself. Bismarck was no mendacious and treacherous diplomatist, but a man of brutal directness, who always proclaimed the truth and made no secret of his intentions.

"I am for peace," he said. And it was the truth. He was for peace, all for peace, and for the last eighteen years everything went to prove it in the most glaring way, even to his armaments, his alliances, his combination of States against the aggressiveness of France.

"He is a great man," Monsieur de Guilleroy concluded in tones of deep conviction, "a very great man. He is anxious for peace, but he believes that nothing but threats and violent measures will secure it. In a word, he is a savage on the grand scale."

"To a man like that the end justifies the means," replied

Musadieu. "I grant you his enthusiasm for peace, if you will allow that he is always yearning to go to war to ensure it. The paradox is true and irrefutable: in this world, war is never waged except in the interests of peace."

The Duchess de Mortemain was announced. The double doors were thrown back to admit a tall, stout woman who entered with an air of command. Guilleroy hastened forward to meet her, and raised her hand to his lips.

"How are you, Duchess?"

The other men greeted her with mingled deference and familiarity, for the Duchess had a way with her, at once cordial and abrupt. Widow of General the Duke de Mortemain, her only child married to the Prince de Salia, and herself the daughter of the Marquis de Farandal, she came of a great family and possessed a princely fortune. At her house in the Rue de la Varenne, she entertained all the celebrities in the world, who met in her drawing-room and exchanged much mutual admiration. No Royal personage passed through Paris without dining at her table, and no man could attract public attention without inspiring her with a desire to make his acquaintance. She never rested until she had seen him, drawn him into conversation, and formed her opinion of him. It amused her, gave her an interest in life, and ministered to her consuming passion of patronising but benevolent curiosity.

As she took a chair, a young couple, the Baron and Baroness de Corbelle were announced; the husband stout and bald, the wife a slender brunette, dressed in the height of fashion.

The Corbelles, who were related to the Count de Guilleroy, occupied a peculiar position in society, which they owed entirely to their fastidiousness in their choice of friends. Belonging to the *petite noblesse*, and remarkable neither for breeding nor intelligence, they were guided in all their actions by an exaggerated reverence for convention. By dint of frequenting only the most august households; of manifesting the most proper sentiments, royalist and clerical in the highest degree; of showing respect in the right quarter,

and contempt where contempt was due; of never being guilty of a social solecism, or hesitating on a point of etiquette, they passed in the eyes of many for the fine flower of high society. They were looked upon as arbiters on questions of good form, and their mere presence conferred upon a house a real title of distinction.

"But where is your wife?" exclaimed the Duchess.

"Just a minute, just one little minute," pleaded the Count. "She is coming immediately. She has a surprise for you."

A month after her marriage, Madame de Guilleroy had made her entry into society, and had been presented to the Duchess, who at once fell in love with her, and took her under her wing. For twenty years, nothing had clouded their friendship, the Duchess still called her "dear child," in a voice that had lost none of the tenderness of that sudden but lasting infatuation. It was at her house that the Countess had met Oliver Bertin.

Musadieu came up to her.

"Duchess, have you seen the exhibition of the Intemperates?"

"No. What on earth is it?"

"A new set of impressionist artists, who only paint when they are drunk. Two of them are very clever."

"That sort of tomfoolery doesn't appeal to me," said the great lady, disdainfully.

Curt and dictatorial, intolerant of any opinion except her own, which owed its authority solely to her consciousness of her social position, she almost unwittingly regarded artists and learned men as intelligent mercenaries, sent into the world by Providence for the amusement or convenience of their betters. Her judgment depended entirely upon the degree of interest or irrational pleasure inspired in her by some work of art, some book, or the account of some discovery.

Tall and stout, of massive build and florid complexion, she had a loud voice, and was supposed to possess the grand manner, because nothing ever ruffled her, and because she always spoke her mind and patronised everyone, from exiled

princes, with the entertainments she gave in their honour, to the Almighty, with her munificence towards the clergy and the Church.

"Have you heard, Duchess," Musadieu resumed, "they think they have caught the murderer of Marie Lambourg?"

Her interest was at once aroused.

"No; tell me about it."

He proceeded to give her full details.

Musadieu was tall and very thin, and wore a white waistcoat and small diamond shirt studs. He spoke with an absence of gesture and an air of breeding, to which he owed his license for the extremely daring remarks for which he was noted. He was so short-sighted that, in spite of his eyeglasses, he never seemed to recognise anyone. When he sat down, he appeared to adapt his whole frame to the curves of his armchair. His bent body seemed to shrink and crumple up, as if his backbone were made of rubber; his crossed legs looked like twisted ribbons; his long arms rested on the sides of the chair, allowing his colourless hands with their prodigiously long fingers to droop from the wrists. He dyed his hair and moustache, but, to the amusement of his friends, artistically omitted a silver lock here and there.

He was relating to the Duchess how the supposed murderer had presented jewels belonging to his victim, who was a girl of the streets, to another woman of the same class, when the doors of the great drawing-room were thrown open once more, and two women stood upon the threshold—two smiling, fair-haired women, in white lace gowns of foamy Mechlin, with their arms round each other's waist. They were as alike as two sisters, though with many years between them; the elder a shade too ripe, too plump; the younger a trifle immature, a thought too slim.

They were received with cries of delight. No one except Oliver Bertin had known of Annette's return. The pair made a delightful picture. From a little distance, the mother looked almost as blooming as and even handsomer than the child at her side; overblown flower though she was, she still

possessed dazzling beauty, while Annette's budding charms as yet hardly amounted to prettiness.

The Duchess clapped her hands in rapture.

"Dear me, how quaint and pretty it is to see them side by side! Do look at them, Monsieur de Musadieu. How extraordinarily alike they are!"

The guests compared mother and daughter, and opinions were divided. Musadieu, the Corbelles and Count de Guilleroy held that the only points of resemblance were their complexion, hair and eyes; their eyes, especially, were exactly alike, with the same black dots, like tiny specks of ink, on the blue of the iris. But presently, when the girl was grown up, the resemblance would become very faint.

According to the Duchess and Oliver Bertin, allowing for the difference in age, they were exactly alike in every respect.

"It's extraordinary how much she has changed in three years. I should never have known her. I shall have to drop the '*tu*' now, as she's no longer a child," said Bertin.

"How absurd! I should just like to hear you!" said the Countess, laughing.

There was a promise of future daring in Annette's shy, but arch reply:

"Yes, but I shall never dare to say '*tu*' to Monsieur Bertin now."

"It's a bad habit, but you're welcome to keep it up," said her mother smiling. "You will soon feel at home with him again."

But Annette shook her head.

"No. I couldn't. I should feel shy."

The Duchess kissed her and then looked her up and down with a keen and critical eye.

"Let me see you, child. Yes, you're the very image of your mother. You'll do later on, when you've taken on some polish. But you must put on a little flesh, just a very little. There's nothing of you."

"Oh, don't tell her that," cried the Countess.

"Why not?"

" It's so nice to be thin. I am seriously trying to reduce myself."

Madame de Mortemain was annoyed, and in her exasperation, she forgot that a young person was present.

" Oh, of course ! " she broke out, " you're all for that silly fashion of skin and bone, because it's easier to dress. But I belong to the generation when women were supposed to be well-covered. To-day it's the turn of the scraggy ones. It's like Pharoah's fat and lean kine. I simply can't see what men admire in such skeletons. In my time they wanted something better."

Everyone was smiling and she broke off and turned to Annette.

" Look at your mother, my dear. She's just right; model yourself on her."

They went into dinner and Musadieu continued the discussion.

" In my opinion, men ought always to keep thin, because they are built for athletic exercises, requiring skill and agility, which don't go with a corporation. But women are rather different. What do you say, Corbelle? "

Corbelle was in a dilemma, the Duchess was stout and his own wife almost painfully thin. The Baroness, however, came to the rescue and declared herself emphatically in favour of slimness. A year ago she had had to check a slight tendency to put on weight, and had very soon succeeded.

" What did you do? " asked Madame de Guilleroy.

The Baroness explained the methods employed by all the leaders of fashion. They never drank at meals. An hour after each repast, they allowed themselves one cup of scalding tea. The remedy was invariably successful. She quoted amazing instances of stout women who in three months had become as thin as laths.

" Good heavens, how absurd to make such a martyr of oneself ! You deny yourself everything, even a glass of champagne. Monsieur Bertin, you're an artist. Tell us what you think about it."

"Why, my dear Duchess, I am a painter, my business is with drapery, so it's all one to me. If I were a sculptor I might complain."

"But which do you personally prefer?"

"Oh, I'm all for a certain graceful opulence. I prefer what my cook calls a plump little corn-fed bird, not fat but nicely filled out."

The comparison raised a laugh. But the Countess was not convinced. She murmured, with a glance at her daughter:

"No, it's very nice to be thin. Women who remain thin never show their age."

This point was discussed and again opinions were divided. But they all more or less agreed that very stout persons ought not to reduce themselves too suddenly. This led to a general review of well-known society beauties, to fresh judgments on their charm and distinction. Musadieu sang the praises of the pink and white Marquise de Lochrist, while Bertin commended the sombre beauty, the low brow, dark eyes, somewhat large mouth and flashing teeth of Madame Mandelière.

Suddenly he turned to Annette, who was seated on his left.

"Listen with all your ears, Nanette. You will hear everything we have been saying repeated at least once a week, till you are old and grey, and in a few days you will know by heart everything everybody thinks about politics, women, the latest play and so on. You will only have to change the names of the people and the plays from time to time. When you have heard us all express and defend our own perfectly proper and correct opinions, you may quietly adopt as your own whichever one you prefer. That will save you the trouble of thinking and you will have nothing more to do but enjoy a well-earned repose."

The girl made no reply, but shot at Oliver a roguish glance, which revealed an alert and keen intelligence, held in check, but straining at the leash.

The Duchess and Musadieu, who bandied ideas as if they were balls, without noticing that it was always the same

one that they tossed backwards and forwards, protested in the name of human thought and endeavour. Bertin set himself to prove the barrenness, the futility, the insignificance of the minds of even the most intelligent members of society; the instability of their beliefs, their attitude of half-hearted interest or complete indifference towards things of the spirit, their hesitating and changeable tastes.

In a burst of scorn, half genuine, half assumed, actuated at first by a desire to show himself eloquent, then fired by that keen insight of his, which was usually held in check by his urbanity, he showed how men, whose sole occupation in lift was paying calls and dining out, gradually became by an inevitable process, amiable, frivolous creatures, utterly commonplace, vaguely moved by superficial cares, beliefs and desires. He showed that nothing in them had depth, enthusiasm, sincerity, that their intellectual culture was nought, their learning the thinnest veneer, that they were, in fact, mere lay figures, producing the illusion, and performing the antics of beings of a chosen race, which they certainly were not. He proved that, their instincts being precariously rooted in conventions and not in fundamental facts, they could never really care for anything, that even the luxury that surrounded them ministered merely to their vanity and not to some subtle physical need, for their dinners were always bad and their wines as detestable as they were expensive.

"They live in the middle of things," Oliver continued, "and neither see nor understand. There it all lies within their grasp; science of which they know nothing; nature to which they are blind; happiness, for which they have no capacity whatever; the beauty of the world, the beauty of art, which they discuss without any conception of it, without even believing in it, for they have never known the raptures of life, and the ecstasies of the spirit. They are incapable of whole-hearted devotion to any single thing, of concentrating upon one subject, until the joy of true understanding dawns upon them."

Baron de Corbelle thought it his duty to espouse the cause

of fashionable society, and did so with arguments which were irrational but unanswerable, dissolving in the light of reason like snow in the fire, but as elusive as the preposterous logic with which a country parson complacently proves the existence of God. He wound up by comparing men of fashion to racehorses, which had, indeed, no utilitarian value, but were, none the less, the glory of the equine race.

Disconcerted by this attack, Bertin at first preserved a polite but disdainful silence. At last, exasperated by the Baron's nonsense, he cleverly interrupted his flow of eloquence, and described in full the day of a man about town, from his first waking moment till bed-time.

With a quick eye for detail, he sketched a caricature which was exquisitely ludicrous. He exhibited his fine gentleman being dressed by his valet; exchanging a few general ideas with the barber, who came to shave him; consulting the grooms about the condition of his horses, just as he was setting out for his morning ride; cantering down the alleys of the Bois, his one ambition to exchange bows with his acquaintances; lunching with his wife; driving with her in her carriage, his only attempt at conversation a recital of the names of the people he had seen that morning; flitting during the rest of the afternoon from one drawing-room to another; refreshing his mind by communing with his fellows; dining with a prince; discussing at his table European politics, and finishing his evening in the promenade at the Opera, where his mild pretensions to dissipation were innocuously gratified by a mere semblance of vice.

The portrait was so true to life, the satire so innocent of offence, that everyone laughed. The Duchess, whose figure did not allow her to give full vent to her mirth, kept gently shaking with suppressed ripples of merriment.

"Oh, you're too funny!" she exclaimed at last. "You'll make me die of laughing."

Bertin, whose blood was up, retorted:

"No, Duchess. In society people don't die of laughing. It's as much as they can do to laugh at all. They condescend

to smile and pretend to be amused. It's a fairly successful imitation, but never the real thing. If you want to see people laugh, go to the cheap theatres. Watch the lower classes enjoying themselves and see them choking with laughter. Or visit a soldier's barrack room and you'll see men lying convulsed on their beds, helpless and weeping with laughter at the jokes of the regimental buffoon. But in our drawing-rooms nobody laughs. As I said we only ape reality, in laughter as in everything else."

Musadieu put in a word.

"You're too hard on us, my dear fellow. And you don't appear personally to despise the frivolous world, although you satirise it so cleverly."

Bertin smiled.

"Of course not. I adore it."

"Well, then?"

"I rather despise myself, as a mongrel of doubtful origin."

"That's all a pose," remarked the Duchess.

Bertin protested against this accusation, but she ended the discussion by declaring that artists always tried to persuade people that the moon was made of green cheese. The conversation became general, touching upon every subject pleasantly, agreeably, discreetly, and tritely. Towards the end of dinner, the Countess pointed to the untouched glasses of wine in front of her.

"Look, I haven't drunk a drop, not a single drop. We shall soon see if I don't get thin."

The indignant Duchess tried in vain to insist upon her taking a little mineral water.

"How silly she is," she cried. "Her daughter has turned her head. For heaven's sake, Monsieur de Guilleroy, don't let your wife be such a fool."

The Count, who had been describing to Musadieu a new threshing machine from America, had not been listening to the conversation.

"What has she been doing, Duchess?"

"Why, this idiotic notion of hers of getting thin."

He bestowed on his wife a glance of good-humoured indifference.

"Well, you see, I never interfere with her."

The Countess rose, and took her neighbour's arm, while the Count paired off with the Duchess, and the whole party passed into the great drawing-room, the boudoir beyond being used only for afternoon receptions.

The room was spacious and brilliantly lighted. In the glow of the lamps and the candelabra, the walls with their large panels of pale blue silk, exquisitely worked with antique designs and framed in white and gold, gleamed with a pearly radiance, soft as moonlight. Oliver Bertin's portrait of the Countess had the place of honour, and seemed to lend to its surroundings life and animation, as if it felt at home there. The room seemed to bask in that smile of youth and grace, in the ethereal brightness of that shining hair.

It was almost a rite, a kind of necessary formality, like crossing oneself on entering a church, to pause in front of the portrait and to congratulate the original on the success the artist had achieved. Musadieu never omitted it. As a Government expert his opinion had the weight of his official status, and he thought it his duty constantly to vouch for the excellence of the painting.

"I assure you it's the finest modern portrait I know. It is so amazingly alive."

The Count in whom these constant eulogies had implanted a firm conviction that he owned a masterpiece, joined the group and improved upon their praises. For some minutes they vied with one another in uttering all the usual technical terms to describe the obvious and studied merits of the picture. Everyone cast admiring glances at the wall, while Oliver, who accepted these customary tributes much as one regards a casual enquiry after one's health, merely adjusted the reflecting lamp which was intended to throw light on the picture, but had been carelessly placed to one side.

Presently the guests dispersed themselves about the room and the Count went to talk to the Duchess.

"I rather think my nephew is calling for me," she said, "and will come in for a cup of tea."

For some time they had both been nursing an identical hope, each conscious of the other's desire, though as yet neither had confided in the other, even by so much as a hint.

After gambling away most of his fortune, the Marquis de Farandal, the Duchess's brother, had been killed by a fall from his horse, leaving a widow and one son. The latter was now about twenty-eight and the most popular leader of cotillions in Europe, being actually summoned now and then to London or Vienna to grace a state ball with his exquisite waltzing, and though he had hardly a penny, thanks to his name and his position as representative of a family of almost royal blood, he was the most sought after and the most envied young man in Paris. The time had come to consolidate on more serious lines this juvenile reputation for dancing and athletics. A really wealthy match would pave the way to political distinction, which would take the place of social triumphs. Once a Deputy, the Marquis would become *ipso facto* one of the leaders of the Royalist party, and in days to come, a prop of the throne and one of the King's advisers. The Duchess, who commanded trustworthy sources of information, was aware of the vast fortune of Monsieur de Guilleroy, who hoarded his treasures and preferred to live in a modest flat, when he might have lorded it in the most sumptuous mansion in Paris. She knew all about his unfailing luck in speculation; his keen intuition in financial matters; his share in all the most lucrative enterprises of recent years, and she had hit upon the idea of marrying her nephew to the daughter of this Norman Deputy, who would thereby gain a predominating influence in the aristocratic circles revolving around the Royal family. Monsieur de Guilleroy, who had married money, as well as multiplying his own very substantial fortune, was now nursing other ambitions.

He believed in the King's restoration, and intended to be in a position to profit to the utmost by this event. As a mere Deputy he counted for very little. But as father-in-law

of the Marquis de Farandal, whose ancestors had been the faithful adherents and favourites of the Royal House of France, he would at once attain the first rank.

The Duchess's affection for his wife would give to the match a very desirable tone of friendliness. For fear lest the Marquis should be seized with a sudden fancy for some other girl, Monsieur de Guilleroy had sent for his daughter in order to expedite matters.

In Madame de Mortemain, who had correctly guessed this scheme of his, he had a silent accomplice, and although the girl's sudden return was a complete surprise to her, she had asked her nephew to call on the Guilleroys that evening, so that he might gradually acquire the habit of frequenting their home.

For the first time, the Count and the Duchess alluded in veiled terms to their common hope, and before they parted a treaty of alliance was concluded.

At the other end of the room there was a burst of merriment. Just as Musadieu was describing to the Baroness the presentation of a negro Embassy to the President of the Republic, the Marquis de Farandal was announced. He paused on the threshold to fix with a quick, habitual gesture, a monocle in his right eye, as if to survey the room he was about to enter and, perhaps, to attract attention to his arrival and to give the assembled company time to admire him. With an almost imperceptible twitch of the eyebrow he dropped his monocle, which dangled at the end of a thin black silk cord. Then he hastened towards his hostess and, bowing very low, raised her hand to his lips. He saluted his aunt in the same manner, then bowed and shook hands all round, moving from one to another with ease and grace.

He was tall, with a tendency to baldness, an auburn moustache, a soldierly figure, and there was a touch of the English sporstman in his ways. He had the look of a man who exercised his muscles more than his brains, and cared only for such pursuits as tended to develop strength and physical activity. But he was not without education. He had studied, and still applied himself every day with a mighty

mental effort to all the subjects likely to be of use to him in time to come; history, to which he brought a passionate enthusiasm for dates and a complete misunderstanding of all the lessons to be derived from the past; as much political economy as was necessary for a Deputy, and the A.B.C. of Sociology, as the governing classes understand it.

Musadieu thought highly of him and predicted a brilliant career. Bertin admired his strength and skill. They went to the same fencing school, and often met out hunting and riding in the Bois. These common tastes created a bond of sympathy between them, that instinctive freemasonry that unites two men who have at their command a ready-made topic of conversation interesting to both of them.

As soon as he was introduced to Annette, a suspicion of his aunt's design at once flashed upon him, and after bowing to her, he surveyed her with the rapid glance of the expert. He thought her charming, and, what was more, promising. He had led so many cotillions that he was a good judge, and could weigh a girl's chances of future beauty almost as accurately as a taster pronouncing on a wine not yet mature. But he only exchanged a few commonplace remarks with her, and then came to anchor beside Baroness de Corbelle for a little discreet gossip.

The party broke up early. All the guests had left; Annette was asleep; the lamps had been put out and the servants had gone to their rooms, but Count de Guilleroy continued to pace the drawing-room by the light of two candles, keeping the Countess, who was half asleep, in an armchair, out of her bed for a prodigious time, while he discoursed of his hopes, of the attitude to be adopted, of the prospects of success, of possible difficulties and their counter-measures.

It was late when he retired to rest, well pleased with his evening's work.

"I think," he muttered to himself, "we may look upon the affair as settled."

III

"WHEN are you coming to see me, my dear? I haven't had a glimpse of you for three days and that's an eternity. Annette takes up a good deal of my time, but you know that I can't get on without you."

Still at a loss for a subject for a picture, Oliver was busy making pencil studies. He read the Countess's note twice and then put it away in a drawer of his writing table. Ever since the first days of their liaison, thanks to the facilities afforded by social life, they were accustomed to meeting each other nearly every day. Sometimes she came to the studio and without interrupting his work, spent an hour or two in the armchair, where she had sat for her portrait. But as she was a little afraid of his servants gossiping, she preferred that these daily meetings, the small coin of love, should take place either in her own house or in someone else's drawing-room. They made their arrangements a little time ahead, without once rousing Monsieur de Guilleroy's suspicions.

Twice a week at least Oliver dined at their house with other friends. On Mondays he always paid his respects to the Countess in her box at the Opera. On other days they agreed to meet at different houses, where it so happened that they invariably arrived at the same time. He always knew the evenings when she would be in, and would come after dinner for a cup of tea, feeling blissfully at home with the rustle of her gown close to him, warmly and safely ensconced in their mature affection. He had become such a slave to this habit of meeting her every day, lingering near her for some moments, exchanging a few words and

mingling his thoughts with hers, that although the fires of passion had long since died down, he was obsessed by a continual longing for her presence. The domestic instinct which is dormant in every human heart; that longing for a cheerful home, for companionship at table, for evenings of easy talk with those who have long shared our lives, for the intimacy, the casual caress, the careless touch, that desire which impels every old bachelor from house to house till he finds a little niche by some friendly fireside, added a strong element of selfishness to Oliver's affection. Here in this house where he was loved and petted, where all his wishes were gratified, he could always find relief and solace for his loneliness.

But it was three days now since he had seen his friends, who, presumably, were much occupied by their daughter's return. Already he was beginning to tire of his own company, and to feel a little hurt because they had not yet asked him to the house, though he tactfully refrained from inviting himself.

The Countess's note roused him like the crack of a whip. It was three in the afternoon. He decided to lose no time in calling on her at once, in the hope of catching her before she went out.

He rang for his man.

"What's the weather like, Joseph?"

"Very fine, sir."

"Warm?"

"Yes, sir."

"My blue suit, a white waistcoat and my grey hat."

Although he was always very well turned out and went to a good tailor, the way he wore his clothes, his walk, his rather tight white waistcoat, his high-crowned grey felt hat, worn slightly to the back of the head, at once betrayed the artist and the bachelor.

When he reached the house, he was told that the Countess was dressing for a drive in the Bois. He waited for her with a sense of injury.

According to his usual habit he began to pace the great

dim drawing-room with its heavy curtains, striding from one chair to another, or from window to wall. Graceful little gilt-legged tables were littered with knick-knacks of every description, useless, pretty and costly trifles in artistic disorder.

There were little antique caskets of wrought gold, snuff boxes set with miniatures, ivory statuettes, together with some quite modern knick-knacks in dull silver, in the English taste, freakish rather than pleasing: a tiny kitchen range, with a cat drinking out of a saucepan, a cigarette-case in the shape of a loaf of bread; a matchbox like a coffee-pot, and a case containing a whole set of doll's jewellery, necklaces, bracelets, rings, brooches, gold earrings, set with diamonds, sapphires and rubies, so tiny, so absurd, that they might have been fashioned by jewellers of Lilliput. Now and then he picked up some birthday gift of his own, turned it over in his hands with dreamy indifference and laid it down again. In a corner of the room in front of a small round settee was a stand with a few exquisitely bound books, which were seldom opened; a somewhat battered copy of the "*Revue des Deux Mondes,*" its pages dog-eared, as if it had been read and re-read, and other journals with leaves still uncut; *Les Arts Modernes,* which everyone subscribed to because its price was four hundred francs a year, and the "*Feuille Libre,*" a thin volume in blue covers, in which the latest school of poets, known as the Emasculates, poured out their souls.

Between two windows stood the Countess's graceful, 18th century writing table, where she dashed off answers to any urgent notes that were brought to her during a reception. Here there were other books; old favourites, eloquent of the heart and mind of woman: Musset, Manon L'Escaut, and Werther, and, as if to prove that their owner was no stranger to complex emotions and psychological mysteries, "*Les Fleurs du Mal,*" "*Le Rouge et le Noir,*" "*La Femme du XVIII Siecle,*" and "*Adolphe.*"

Beside the books lay a beautiful handglass, an exquisite specimen of goldsmith's art, placed face downwards on a

square of embroidered velvet to show the intricate design worked in silver and gold on the back. Bertin picked it up and looked at himself. In the last few years he had aged terribly, and though he thought that his face had gained in character, he was beginning to lament the sagging muscles of his cheeks and the wrinkles in his skin.

The door opened behind him.

"How do you do, Monsieur Bertin?" said Annette.

"How do you do, my dear? Quite well?"

"Yes, thank you, and you?"

"So you have really made up your mind to drop the '*tu*'?" he said, noticing that she had relinguished her old childish habit.

"Yes, it makes me feel uncomfortable."

"My dear child!"

"Yes, it really does. It embarrasses me."

"Why?"

"Because—because you're neither young enough, nor old enough."

Bertin laughed.

"I can't insist, if you give such good reasons."

At that she blushed to the roots of her hair.

"Mamma sent me to tell you," she continued shyly, "that she'll be down in a minute, and to ask you to come for a drive with us in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"I shall be charmed. Just you and your mother?"

"No, the Duchess de Mortemain is coming too."

"I'll come with pleasure."

"Will you excuse me if I go away now to put on my hat?"

"Certainly, my dear."

As she left the room, the Countess entered in hat and veil, ready for her drive. She held out her hands to him.

"We see nothing of you now. What have you been doing?"

"I did not like to intrude."

"Oliver!" she exclaimed, with an infinity of reproach and love in her voice.

"You are the dearest woman in the world," he replied, touched by her appeal.

Their tender little quarrel thus disposed of, the Countess resumed in her usual conventional tones:

"We will call for the Duchess and then go for a drive in the Bois. We must show Nanette all the sights."

The carriage was waiting in the covered entrance. Bertin seated himself facing the two ladies, and the horses started, the vaulted roof echoing to the sound of their hoofs.

The wide boulevard leading to the Madeleine seemed to be basking in all the gaiety of the early spring, descending from heaven upon the human race. The warm sunshine lent to the men a festive air; to the women an amorous grace; it set the street urchins gambolling, while the pastry-cooks' boys in their white caps deposited their baskets on the benches and ran and played with their brother ragamuffins. The very dogs seemed to have urgent business; the canaries in the porters' lodges were singing their hearts out, and only the dejected, broken-down old cab-horses limped along at their usual funereal pace.

"What a lovely day," sighed the Countess. "It's good to be alive."

Oliver was comparing the two, mother and daughter, in the brilliant sunlight. True there were differences, yet the resemblance was so striking that the child might well be considered a projection of her mother, fashioned of the same flesh and bone, glowing with the same vitality.

They had the same eyes, those blue eyes flecked with black, one pair a little faded, the other pair bright with youth, and they looked at him with such a similarity of expression that whenever he spoke to them, he half expected to hear them make the same reply. But as he made them laugh and talk, he realised with surprise that he was contemplating two distinct personalities, one a woman who had lived her life, the other a girl with all her life before her. He tried in vain to imagine how this child would shape, when her young mind, under the influence of tastes and instincts hitherto dormant, had developed and expanded among the realities

of existence. She was a charming little creature, new to life, ready for its chances, ready for love, a mystery to herself as to others, a ship leaving port just as her mother was returning thither, after her voyage over the ocean of fate and love.

Touched by the thought that this woman, so comely still, driving in her luxurious carriage through the warm spring air, had honoured him with her choice, and had never ceased to care for him, he bestowed upon her a look of gratitude, which she was quick to interpret, and he thought he felt her skirt flutter against him caressingly.

He too sighed:

"Yes, it really is a lovely day!"

They called for the Duchess at her house in the rue de Varenne, and drove towards the Invalides; then they crossed the Seine and turned into the Champs Elysées, in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe, with a stream of other carriages.

Annette, who was now seated by Oliver's side, with her back to the horses, watched the procession with eager and ingenuous eyes. Now and then, when the Duchess and the Countess nodded to some acquaintance, she asked:

"Who was that?"

And Oliver would reel off a string of names: "the Pontaiglins; the Puicelci; the Countess de Lochrist; pretty Madame Mandelière."

Turning into the avenue of the Bois de Boulogne they were at once immersed in the clatter of wheeled traffic. There was rather more space here between the carriages than near the Arc de Triomphe, and they seemed to be competing in an interminable race. Through this staid procession of cabs, cumbrous landaus, pompous eight-springed vehicles, all vying with one another, through this moving throng, drawn from every class, grade, and sphere of society, from the highest to the lowest in the land, dashed at headlong speed a victoria with a single trotting horse, its occupant a languid young woman in a light-coloured, daring gown,

whence the strange perfume of some exotic flower was wafted to the different carriages as she flashed past.

"Who is that lady?" asked Annette.

"I don't know," said Bertin, while the Duchess and the Countess exchanged smiles.

The trees were putting forth their leaves, and in the young verdure the tame nightingales, which haunt those gardens of Paris, were already singing. Near the lake the procession slowed down to a walk; now and then the wheels of the carriages brushed, and there was a continuous interchange of bows, smiles and pleasant talk. It was like a fleet of boats gliding smoothly along, their occupants ladies and gentlemen on their best behaviour. The Duchess, who never stopped nodding in response to raised hats and inclining heads, seemed to pass in review all her acquaintances as they went by, recalling everything she had ever heard, thought or imagined about each one of them.

"Look, child, there's the lovely Madame Mandelière again, the beauty of the Republic."

The reigning beauty was driving in a smart, light turn-out, and was accepting, with an appearance of indifference, the open admiration evoked by her great dark eyes, her low forehead beneath its crown of black hair, her petulant mouth with its somewhat full lips.

"A great beauty, whatever else she may be," remarked Bertin.

The Countess, who could not bear to hear him praise another woman, shrugged her shoulders slightly, and made no reply.

But Annette's feminine instinct of jealousy was suddenly aroused.

"Personally I don't think so at all," she ventured.

"What," exclaimed Oliver, "you don't think her beautiful?"

"No, she looks as if she had been dipped in ink."

The Duchess was delighted.

"Capital, child! And yet for the last six years half the men in Paris have lost their heads over that blackamoor.

I think they do it to tease us. You had much better look at the Countess de Lochrist over there."

Alone in her landau with her white poodle, the Countess de Lochrist bowed to them with a set smile on her face. Exquisite as a miniature, a brown-eyed blonde, she, too, for the last five or six years had had her following, who went into raptures over the delicate beauty of her features.

She, however, likewise failed to impress Nanette.

"O," she said, "isn't she rather faded?"

Bertin, who in the unending discussions about these two rival beauties, never took the side of the Countess, was suddenly annoyed by this youthful insolence.

"Upon my word," he cried, "like her or not, she's charming, and I only hope you'll grow up half as pretty."

"Nonsense," replied the Duchess. "You never look at any woman under thirty. The child is perfectly right. You never admire them until they have gone off."

"Allow me to tell you," he cried, "a woman is never really beautiful till later, when her expression is fully revealed."'

As he expounded his theory, that the freshness of youth is merely a superficial veneer to beauty while it is ripening, he declared that men of the world were right not to waste their time on women in the first flush of youth, nor to pronounce them beautiful till they had reached their final period of bloom.

Flattered by his words, the Countess said softly:

"He is right. He speaks as an artist. A young face has charm, but it is always a little insipid."

Bertin pursued the subject, indicating at what stage a face gradually exchanges the vague prettiness of youth for firmness of line, character and individuality. The Countess nodded her approval at every word he said. The more he pleaded his cause, with the warmth of an advocate, the vehemence of an accused on his defence, the more she supported him with look and gesture; it was as if they were allied for mutual support and protection against some danger, the menace of an unjust verdict.

Annette was too busy looking about her to listen. Her face, usually all smiles, wore a serious expression, and she sat silent, dazzled by the animated scene around her. All this was for her, the sun, the leaves on the trees, the carriages, all this gay luxurious life. She, too, could come here day after day, like those other women, known, and bowed to and envied; and perhaps men would point her out and say how lovely she was.

She picked out all the men and women whose elegance impressed her most, and asked their names, oblivious to everything but these groups of syllables, some of which she remembered, with a thrill of respect and admiration, to have seen in the newspapers or in history books. She could not get used to this march past of celebrities, and could hardly believe that they were real and that she was not watching a play.

The hackney cabs inspired her with mingled contempt and disgust; the sight of them jarred on her.

"I do think," she broke out, "that only private carriages ought to be allowed in here."

"Come, young woman," replied Bertin, "what about Liberty, Equality, Fraternity?"

She turned up her little nose as if to say:

"O, that's for other people."

"They could keep a special park for the cabs," she suggested. "Why not the Bois de Vincennes?"

"You are behind the times my child. Don't you know that we're floating on a full tide of democracy? But if you really want to see the Bois unadulterated, you must come in the morning, and you'll find nobody here but the fine flower of society."

He drew a picture, such as his brush could reproduce so well, of the Bois of a morning, with its troops of riders, men and women, everyone of them members of that club of the elect, who all have at their fingers' ends one another's nicknames, genealogies, titles, vices and virtues, as if they all lived together in the same quarter of Paris or in the same small town.

"Do you often come?" asked Annette.

"Very often. It's the pleasantest thing in Paris."

"You ride every morning?"

"Why, yes."

"And in the afternoon you pay calls?"

"Yes."

"Then when do you work?"

"Oh, I work when the spirit moves me, and then you see, I choose my particular line to suit my tastes. As a painter of fair ladies it's my business to watch them, and to follow whither they lead."

"Both on foot and on horseback?" she asked, still without a hint of a smile.

He shot at her a sidelong glance of approval, as if to say:

"The child has wit. She'll do very well."

From far away across the open country, scarce roused from its winter sleep, stole a breath of cold air, and a shudder crept over the whole Bois, the dainty, shivering, artificial forest. For a moment it stirred the tender leaves upon the trees and the draperies on sensitive shoulders. With an almost simultaneous movement, all the women caught their discarded wraps about their arms and bosoms, while all the horses, from one end of the avenue to the other, broke into a trot, the chilly gust touching them up like the flick of a whip. The slanting rays of the setting sun flooded the world with crimson, as the carriages turned swiftly homewards to the silvery jingle of curb-chains.

"Are you going home?" asked the Countess, who knew all Bertin's habits.

"No, I'm going to the Club."

"Shall we drop you there?"

"Thank you very much."

"And when are you going to invite us to meet the Duchess at luncheon?"

"Name your day."

Bertin, painter by appointment to the ladies of Paris, styled by his admirers a realistic Watteau, nicknamed by his

detractors "the photographer of frocks and frills," often gave luncheon and dinner parties for the radiant beings whose features he had immortalised, and for many other well-known and distinguished women, who delighted in these little bachelor entertainments.

"The day after to-morrow? Would that suit you, Duchess?" asked Madame de Guilleroy.

"Yes. How charming of you. Monsieur Bertin never thinks of asking me to his parties. It's evident that I'm no longer young."

Accustomed to look upon Bertin's house as almost her own, the Countess resumed:

"Just the four of us here in the landau, the Duchess, Annette, you and I. Will that suit you, dear Master?"

"Yes, certainly, just the four of us," he replied, as he alighted; "and you shall have crab *á l'alsacienne.*"

"Oh, you'll make a gourmet of the child."

He bowed to the ladies at the carriage door, then stepped briskly into the entrance hall of the Club. Throwing his coat and stick to one of an army of footmen, who sprang to their feet like soldiers at the approach of an officer, he went up the wide staircase, passing another troop of servants in knee breeches. Pushing open a door he suddenly felt as eager as a youth when he heard the sound of clashing foils, resounding foot beats and ringing shouts issuing from the fencing school at the end of the passage.

"Touché." "One to me." "No." "Touché." "One to you."

The fencers were dressed in suits of grey cloth, with leather jackets, trousers caught in at the ankles and a kind of apron falling from the waist line. With left arm raised and wrist arched, while the other hand, gigantic in its padded glove, held the slender supple foil, they lunged and recovered with the brisk activity of clockwork marionettes. Some of the men sat about resting and talking, still red and perspiring and out of breath, and mopping their necks and faces with their handkerchiefs. Others were looking on, occupying the divan, which ran all round the

hall. Liverdy was matched against Landa, and the Club fencing master, Taillade, against a tall man called Rocdiane.

Bertin felt at home, and smilingly shook hands all round.

"I'll take you on," cried Baron de Baverie.

"Right, my dear fellow," and Oliver went into the dressing room to change.

He had not felt so fit and active for many a day, and, confident that he would prove to be in good form, he hurried like a schoolboy going out to play. As soon as he was confronted with his opponent, he attacked so furiously that he touched him a dozen times in as many minutes, and the Baron, completely exhausted, cried a halt. Then he took on Punisimont, and after him a brother artist, Amaury Maldant.

The icy shock of the cold shower bath on his panting body reminded him of the headers he used to take, when he was twenty, off the bridges in the suburbs into the Seine, in mid-autumn, to astonish the counter-jumpers.

"Are you dining here?" asked Maldant.

"Yes."

"We'll make up a table with Liverdy, Rocdiane and Landa. Hurry up, it's quarter past seven."

The crowded dining room was humming with conversation. They were all there, those homeless wanderers, busy men and idle, who drift about Paris at night, with no idea of what to do with themselves from seven in the evening onwards, and who dine at the Club on the chance of finding some object or person to which they can attach themselves.

The five friends sat down, and Liverdy, the banker, a sturdy, thickset man of forty, turned to Bertin.

"You were positively possessed this evening."

"Yes," replied Bertin, "I felt that I could do wonders to-day."

His companions smiled and Amaury Maldant, the landscape painter, a little, lean, bald man with a grey beard, said slily:

"It's the same with me. Every April the sap begins to rise, and I put forth a few green leaves, not more than half

a dozen, but it all peters out in sentiment, and nothing ever comes of it."

The Marquis de Rocdiane and the Count de Landa condoled with him. Both of them were older than Maldant, though even a practised eye could hardly have guessed their exact age; both were clubmen, whom regular exercise on horseback and in the fencing school kept in the pink of condition, and they boasted that they were younger in every respect than the decadent rakes of the rising generation.

Rocdiane was a man of good family, who was received everywhere, though suspected of all kinds of shady transactions in money matters, which, as Bertin remarked, was not surprising considering how much of his time he spent in shady places. He was separated from his wife, who made him an allowance, and was Director of various Belgian and Portuguese banks. An aristocratic adventurer of few scruples, with the resolute face of a Don Quixote, he made a parade of his somewhat tarnished honour, furbishing it up every now and then with a little blood drawn in a duel.

Count de Landa, a good-humoured giant, proud of his height and his broad shoulders, could, although he was a married man and father of two children, hardly bring himself to dine three times a week at home. All the remaining evenings he spent with his friends at the Club, after the fencing.

"The Club," he used to say, "is a happy family, for the benefit of men who have as yet no family of their own, men who will never possess one, and men who are bored with the one they have."

The conversation turned on women, and proceeded from anecdotes to recollections, and thence to boasting and indiscreet confidences.

The Marquis de Rocdiane gave such a minute description of his various mistresses, all of them society women, that they could be easily identified, but he withheld their names, to pique the curiosity of his audience. Liverdy referred to his mistresses by their Christian names.

"At that time I was on the best of terms with the wife

of a diplomatist. One evening as I was leaving I said to her: 'My little Marguerite . . .'"

He broke off, seeing the others exchanging smiles.

"Dear me," he continued, "I believe I've let the cat out of the bag. One ought to get into the way of calling every woman Sophie."

Oliver Bertin was the soul of discretion, and made his usual reply to their questions:

"Oh, my models are good enough for me."

They affected to believe him, and Landa, who confined his attentions to women of the town, revelled in the thought of all the dainty tit-bits tripping along the streets and all the young women who unveiled themselves in the artist's presence at ten francs an hour. As bottle after bottle was emptied, all these old fogies, as the younger members of the Club called them, grew red in the face, fired with old desires and the fermentation of stale passions.

After coffee, Rocdiane's indiscretions became more truthful; instead of gossiping about society women, he now sang the praises of professional cocottes.

"Here's to Paris," he cried, brandishing a glass of kümmel, "the only city in the world where a man need never grow old, where even at fifty, as long as he is fit and well-preserved, he can always find a chit of eighteen, as pretty as an angel, to love him."

Landa, who knew his Rocdiane after a few liqueurs, agreed with him enthusiastically, and mentioned all the little girls who still continued to adore him.

But Liverdy, who was more cynical and professed to know all about the sex, muttered:

"Of course, that's what they tell you."

"They prove it, my dear fellow," retorted Landa.

"That sort of proof doesn't count."

"It's good enough for me."

At this Rocdiane broke in.

"Why, bless my soul, they mean it. Do you suppose that a pretty little monkey of twenty, who has played the fool for the last five or six years in Paris, and who has been kissed

by every one of us until she is sick of the sight of a moustache, knows the difference between a man of thirty and a man of sixty? What nonsense! She has seen too much. She knows too much. Look here, I bet you she honestly prefers, in her heart of hearts, an old banker to a young rip. Do you think she knows or gives a thought to it? What does a man's age matter to her? My dear man, fellows like us, the grayer we get the younger we feel, the more the little minxes profess to love us, the more they pet us, and the more in earnest they are."

They rose from table flushed with wine and ready to embark on any amorous adventure. They were discussing how to spend the rest of the evening, Bertin suggesting the Circus, Rocdiane the Hippodrome, Maldant the Eden, Landa the Folies-Bergères, when a faint and distant sound of the tuning of violins reached their ears.

"Are we having music here to-night?" asked Rocdiane.

"Yes," replied Bertin. "Let's listen for ten minutes before we go on."

The others agreed and they passed through the billiard room, drawing-room and card-room into a kind of box overlooking the minstrels' gallery. Four members, ensconced in deep armchairs, were waiting with an air of anticipation, while downstairs, surrounded by rows of empty seats, a dozen other men were standing or sitting about and talking.

The leader of the orchestra tapped on his desk with his bow and the music began.

Oliver Bertin had a passion for music as others had for opium. It set him dreaming. As soon as the sonorous waves of sound reached his ear, he lost himself in a nervous ecstasy, which lent to his mind and body an almost incredible sensitiveness. Intoxicated by the melodies that mingled with his happy dreams and delicious reveries, his imagination indulged in the wildest flights. Crossing his legs, he sat with closed eyes and relaxed muscles, drinking in the music, watching the images which flitted before his mind and sight.

The orchestra was playing a Haydn symphony. As soon as Oliver closed his eyelids, he was in the Bois again, in the

midst of that stream of carriages, with the Countess and her daughter facing him in the landau. He could hear their voices, follow their conversation, feel the motion of the carriage, and breathe in the scent of the young leaves. Three times his neighbour spoke to him and interrupted the vision, and three times it returned, as the motion of the ship after a sea voyage haunts a man in his quiet bed on shore. As the dream developed, the drive in the Bois became a journey to distant lands, with the same two women still seated opposite him through every change, now in a railway carriage, now at table in a strange hotel.

Throughout the symphony they haunted him, as if, during that afternoon drive in the sunshine, both faces had deeply impressed themselves upon his retina. The music ceased. The scraping of chairs and the sound of voices dispelled his airy dream, and he saw his four friends dozing around him, having frankly exchanged their attitude of attention for that of sleep.

"Well, what shall we do now?" he asked after he had roused them.

"I'd like to stay here and have another little nap," said Rocdiane ingenuously.

"The same here," said Landa.

Bertin rose.

"Well, I think I'll go home. I'm rather tired."

In reality he was feeling very much awake. But he wanted to escape another of those evenings he had so often experienced round the baccarat table at the Club. So he went home, and the next morning, after a night of nervous exhilaration, which produces in the artist that condition of mental activity, commonly called inspiration, he decided to remain indoors and work until the evening.

It proved a thoroughly satisfactory day, one of those days when the idea seems to flow straight from the brain to the brush and to transfer itself spontaneously to the canvas. Behind locked doors, safe from intruders, in his own quiet house, in the soothing tranquillity of his studio, he worked with unclouded vision and mind abnormally active, lucid and

alert, tasting the rapture which is granted to the artist alone, that of joyous creation. During these hours he was conscious of nothing but his square of canvas and the image evoked by the caressing strokes of his brush. In this fever of production, he had a strange and delightful sense of exuberant life, heady and overflowing. At night he was utterly exhausted, as after healthy exercise, and he went to bed in the pleasant anticipation of the next day's luncheon party.

The table was profusely decorated with flowers, and the menu carefully chosen, with due regard to Madame de Guilleroy, who in her own dainty way was something of an epicure, and in spite of their spirited but brief resistance, Bertin induced his guests to drink champagne.

"It will go to the child's head," said the Countess.

"Never mind," said the Duchess benignly, "one must make a beginning."

When they returned to the studio they all had a touch of that exhilarating feeling of walking on air, as if wings were springing from their feet.

The Duchess and the Countess, who had to attend a Committee meeting of the *Mères Françaises,* intended first to drop Annette at home. But Bertin suggested that he should take her for a walk and then bring her back to the Boulevard Malesherbes.

"Let's go the longest way," said Annette, as they set out together.

"Would you like a stroll in the Parc Monceau? It's very pretty and we'll look at the babies and the nurses."

"I should love it."

Out of the Avenue Velasquez they passed through the stately, gilded gate, at once entrance and landmark, into the exquisite little park with its artificial charm, which lies like a green oasis in the very heart of Paris, in a setting of stately mansions.

On either side of the broad walks, cunningly planned to wind in and out among the lawns and clumps of trees, are rows of iron garden chairs, where men and women sit and

watch the passers by, while the narrow paths that meander like little streams under over-arching boughs, swarm with children playing in the sand, running and skipping under the careless supervision of their nurses, or the anxious eyes of their mothers.

Great trees, dome-shaped like leafy monuments, giant chestnuts, their dark green foliage relieved by clusters of red or white blossoms, noble sycamores, decorative plane trees, their trunks artistically mottled, are grouped upon the wide undulating lawns, conferring upon the park all the charms of a landscape.

In the warm spring air, one hears among the leaves the cooing of doves as they flutter from tree-top to tree-top, visiting their neighbours, while the sparrows bathe in the rainbow with which the sun irradiates the spray from the hose-pipes that sprinkle the smooth turf. The white statues on their pedestals seem to be posing contentedly amid these cool shades. A marble boy is trying, in vain, to draw from his foot a thorn, which must have pierced him a moment ago, while he was pursuing the Diana yonder in her flight towards the little lake, hidden in the copses which screen a ruined temple. On the edge of the groves are other statues, lovers clasped in a cold embrace, or pensive figures, their hands clasped about one knee. A waterfall foams down over miniature rocks. Here is a tree shaped like a pillar, and overgrown with ivy; yonder a tomb with an inscription. The stone columns erected on the lawns recall the Acropolis as little as these exquisite gardens suggest a primæval forest.

For years Oliver had paid an almost daily visit to this delectable spot in order to study the women of Paris in their proper setting. To this park with its artificial charm come the citizens of Paris to gaze on hot-house flowers and to enjoy, like a presentation of real life at the theatre, the pleasing impersonation of lovely Nature in the very heart of the metropolis.

"It's a place you have to dress for," Bertin would reflect. "People who are badly turned out give one a shock."

He used to wander there by the hour till he knew by heart every plant, every frequenter of the gardens.

With Annette at his side he strolled along the paths, his gaze distracted by the gay and chequered scene around him.

"Oh, what a darling," cried Annette, gazing at a small boy with fair curls, who raised his blue eyes to hers in enraptured surprise. Then she looked at all the other children and, in her delight at all these little, living, be-ribboned marionettes, she began to chatter freely. Tripping along beside him she confided to Bertin her views on the different children, mothers and nurses. She exclaimed with delight at chubby cheeks, and mourned over pale faces.

He listened, more amused by the girl at his side than by the small folk at play. Ever mindful of his art, he murmured: "Perfectly delicious!" thinking to himself what an exquisite picture he could make out of a corner of the park, with a cluster of nurses, mothers and children. He wondered why it had never occurred to him before.

"Do you care about these youngsters?"

"I simply love them."

As he watched her gazing at them, he felt that she was longing to catch them in her arms, kiss them and fondle them, with all the sensuous and tender passion of the potential mother. He marvelled at the maternal instinct lying hidden in that girlish heart.

As she was in a talkative mood he drew her out. With engaging simplicity, she confessed to hopes of social successes and triumphs, to a passion for fine horses, about which she knew almost as much as a dealer, for there was a stud farm at Roncières, and she evidently no more bothered her head about a prospective husband, than about a flat, which one could find easily enough, among the numbers to be let. They came to the lake where a pair of swans and half a dozen ducks were floating, as clean and unruffled as birds of porcelain, and they passed a young woman on a chair, as still as a waxwork figure, with an open book on her knees, her eyes gazing into space and her mind lost in a reverie. Plain and unassuming, dressed like a

modest girl, who has no desire to attract attention, a schoolmistress perhaps, she was far away in dreamland, wafted thither by some word or phrase which had bewitched her heart. Under the impulse of her own secret hopes, she was doubtless living the continuation of the story in her book.

Oliver stood still and looked at her in surprise.

"How good to be able to lose oneself like that!" he exclaimed.

After passing her once, they twice retraced their steps, but she never noticed them, so completely was she absorbed in the distant wanderings of her thoughts.

"Tell me, my child," said Bertin to Annette, "Would it bore you to pose for me once or twice?"

"No, I should be delighted."

"Take a good look at that young lady over there, whose thoughts are abroad in the empyrean."

"The one on that chair?"

"Yes. Well I shall want you to sit like that on a chair, with an open book on your lap, and try to imitate her. Have you ever indulged in day dreams?"

"Yes, certainly."

"What about?"

He tried to persuade her to describe these flights into the blue. But she would not answer; she evaded his questions and turned to watch the ducks swimming after breadcrumbs which a lady was throwing to them. She seemed as embarrassed as if he had touched a sensitive spot. To change the subject she talked about her life at Roncières, how she used to read every day for hours on end to her grandmother, who must be missing her sadly, now that she was away. As he listened to her, Bertin suddenly felt as blithe as a bird, blither than he had ever been in his life. Everything she told him, all the simple, tiny, trivial incidents of her innocent, girlish existence, charmed and interested him.

"Let's sit down," he suggested.

They seated themselves by the water's edge and the two swans kept hovering near them, expecting to be fed. Bertin

felt old memories stirring within him, those vanished memories, which, seemingly lost for ever, have a trick of suddenly returning, no one knows why. They came swiftly crowding upon him, so various and so numerous, that it seemed to him as if a hand had stirred up the dregs of his subconscious mind. He tried to discover the reason of this fermentation of his old life, a phenomenon that had occurred to him more than once in the past, but never on the same scale as to-day. There was always something to account for these sudden evocations, some simple natural cause, more often than not a scent, a fragrant odour. How often the flutter of a woman's gown, wafting to him, as she passed by, the airy effluence of some perfume, had conjured up a whole sequence of forgotten incidents. From old empty scent bottles he had often recovered some reminiscence of the past, while all the stray odours, pleasant and unpleasant, of streets, fields, houses, furniture, the warm scent of summer evenings, the chill breath of winter nights, always revived for him memories of long ago, as if they embalmed all the dead and vanished years like the spices that preserve Egyptian mummies.

Could it be the wet grass or the chestnut blossoms that had thus revived the bygone days? No, it was neither. Then what could it be? Were his eyes responsible for this awakening? But what had he seen? Nothing of any consequence. Perhaps some passer-by had recalled to his subconscious mind some face out of the past and had set all the chords of memory vibrating within him. Perhaps it was some sound that had done it. Again and again at the tinkle of a piano, heard by chance, the accents of an unknown voice, the noise of a barrel organ in a square, grinding out an old-fashioned tune, he had shaken off twenty years and his heart had thrilled with forgotten passions. But the ghost that now haunted him refused to be laid; it continued to hover near him with a vague persistence that was almost exasperating.

What was there around him, close to his side, that could thus rekindle his burnt-out emotions?

"It is getting chilly," he said, "we had better be going."

They rose and resumed their walk. He glanced at the poorer visitors in the garden, who occupied the benches, because they could not afford to hire chairs. Annette, too, began to observe them and to wonder sympathetically how they earned their living, and why, considering how wretched they looked, they chose to come and loiter in these lovely gardens.

And more than ever, Oliver found himself retracing the vanished years. There was a buzzing in his ears, a confused murmur, arising from days that were over and done.

Annette noticed his abstracted air:

"What is it?" she said, "Are you unhappy?"

Her words thrilled him to the heart. Who had spoken them, the girl or her mother—her mother, not in her voice of to-day, but in her voice of old times, so changed now that only this moment had he recognised its tones?

"No," he replied smiling. "It's nothing. I enjoy listening to you. You are a darling, and you remind me of your mother."

How was it, he wondered, that he had been so slow to catch that strange echo of tones once so familiar and now issuing from other lips?

"Go on talking," he said.

"What about?"

"Tell me what your governesses taught you. Were you fond of them?"

His agitation increased as he listened to the prattle of this girl, who was almost a stranger to his affection; he watched eagerly for phrases, tones, ripples of laughter, which seemed to be escaping from her bosom, as if imprisoned there since her mother's youthful days.

She had certain inflections that thrilled him with amazement. True, there were marked differences in the two voices, which accounted for his tardy recognition of the resemblance, and even now often enabled him to distinguish clearly between them. But the variations merely rendered

her sudden recovery of her mother's tones more startling still. Hitherto he had verified the likeness between the two faces with eyes of friendly interest, but the mysterious revival of that voice so mingled their two identities, that when he turned his head to shut out his companion from his sight, he could hardly believe that it was not the Countess who was speaking to him in the accents of twelve years ago. Still bewildered by this delusion, he turned to Annette, and as he met her eyes he experienced once more something of that curious faintness, with which in the early days of their passion, her mother's glance had affected him.

They had walked three times round the park, always passing the same people, the same nurses and children. Annette had transferred her attention to the houses surrounding the park, and was asking the names of their occupants. She wanted to know all about them, questioned Bertin with insatiable curiosity, and seemed to be storing in her eminently feminine mind the information she received. Her face bright with interest, she appeared to be absorbing the facts as much with her eyes as with her ears.

Bertin glanced at the clock on the little pavilion between the two gates, which opened on to the outer Boulevard, and saw that it was close on four.

"It's time to go home," he said, and they made their way slowly to the Boulevard Malesherbes.

After parting from Annette, Oliver strolled down towards the Place de la Concorde, intending to pay a call on the other side of the river.

He hummed a tune; he was feeling so full of life and energy that he wanted to run and jump over all the benches. Paris had never seemed to him so radiantly attractive.

"It's perfectly true," he murmured to himself, "the spring makes all of us young again."

He had been granted one of those hours when the eager mind absorbs impressions with new zest; when the sight seems clearer, more alert, more receptive; when all the senses thrill with keener joy, as if an Almighty hand had revived all the colours of the earth, inspired each living

thing with new vitality, and wound up our capacity for enjoyment, as one winds up a clock that has run down.

His glance roamed from one fascinating object to another. "Only to think," he reflected, "that there are times when I can't find anything to paint."

In this moment of inspired intelligence, he saw his earlier work dwindling into the commonplace. A new method flashed upon him. Henceforward he would interpret life with real truth and genius. He felt that he must set to work at once. He returned to his studio and locked himself in.

Once face to face with his canvas, however, his flaming ardour suddenly flickered out. With a feeling of weariness he threw himself on his divan and sank into a reverie. His usual mood of careless happiness, the nonchalant serenity of a contented man with scarcely a single want unsatisfied, gradually ebbed from his heart, as if something essential were missing in his scheme of things. His house felt empty, and his great studio a wilderness. And as he looked about him he seemed to see, stealing away from him, the shadowy form of a woman, whose presence was dear to him. It was long since he had known the impatience of a lover awaiting his mistress's return, but now, of a sudden, he felt that she was far away, and longed for her with all the desperation of a youth in his twenties. With tender emotion he remembered how passionately they had loved. This great room, which she had so often brightened with her presence, enshrined a thousand memories of her ways, her words, her caresses. Certain days and hours and moments came back to him, and he felt the air around him quivering with the kisses of bygone days. Too restless to keep still, he rose from the divan and began walking up and down, reflecting yet again, that despite this romantic passion which had filled his life, he was lonely, desperately lonely. After long hours of work, when he cast around him the bewildered glances of a man awakening once more to the realities of life, the bare walls of his studio were all that he saw and felt.

With no woman to grace his house, obliged to surround his assignations with the precautions of a thief, he was driven to seek distraction for his leisure hours in all the various public resorts, where the means of killing time may be found and purchased. He had his fixed evenings for the Club, the Circus, the Hippodrome, the Opera, and a dozen different places, to escape from his solitary home, though he would have been only too glad to remain by his own fireside, had she shared it with him. In the early days, he had known hours of tender passion, when it had been agony not to take her and keep her. But when his transports had subsided, he had acquiesced philosophically in a separation which left him his personal freedom.

Now the old regrets had returned, just as if he were falling in love again. And there was no real reason for this sudden revival of his passion—nothing but the beauty of the day, and perhaps that echo of her voice out of the past.

How small a thing suffices to touch the heart of a man on the threshold of age, whose memories are merged in regrets. As in bygone days, he was possessed by a yearning to see her, which was like a fever invading body and mind, and he began to think of her almost like a youthful lover, idealising her charms and exaggerating his own devotion, to increase his desire for her. At last, although he had seen her only that morning, he made up his mind to take tea with her after dinner that very evening.

The hours passed slowly, and when he set out for the Boulevard Malesherbes he was seized with a sudden dread lest she should be out, and he find himself condemned to another solitary evening—though that was by no means an unusual experience.

When the servant informed him that the Countess was at home, he was overjoyed.

"Here I am again," he cried gaily, as he stood on the threshold of the little drawing-room where the two ladies sat working in the light of an electro-plated lamp with two rose-shaded globes set on a tall slender shaft.

"Is that you?" exclaimed the Countess. "How delightful!"

"Yes. I was feeling lonely, so I came to see you."

"How charming of you."

"Are you expecting any visitors?"

"No . . . well, perhaps . . . I never know."

He sat down, with a look of disgust at the strips of coarse grey wool, which they were busily knitting on long wooden needles.

"What on earth are you making?"

"Coverlets."

"For the poor?"

"Yes, of course."

"They are very ugly."

"They are very warm."

"I daresay, but they're perfectly hideous, especially in a Louis XV room where everything else is a delight to the eyes. If not for the sake of the poor, at least for the sake of your friends, you ought to choose something more attractive for your works of charity."

The Countess shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, you men! Why, everyone is making these coverlets."

"As if I didn't know that. One can't pay an evening call without seeing these revolting grey objects sprawling over the prettiest frocks and the most delightful bits of furniture. Your charitable efforts are in the worst possible taste this spring."

As if to test the truth of his remarks, the Countess draped her knitting over a damask chair by her side.

"Yes, it's certainly hideous," she agreed dispassionately.

Then she resumed her work. Mother and daughter sat close together under the double lamp, bending over their task; their hair, their faces, their gowns, their busy fingers were bathed in a flood of rosy light, and they looked at their knitting with the steady but superficial attention of women accustomed to needlework, which occupies the sight while

leaving the mind at liberty. In the corners of the room, antique columns of gilded wood supported four other lamps of Chinese porcelain, which shed upon the tapestries a subdued and steady glow, softened by the lace shades over the globes.

Oliver sat almost at the Countess's feet in a very low, dwarf armchair, just big enough to hold him, which he always preferred for his talks with her.

"You and Nané had a long walk in the park this afternoon."

"Yes, we chattered like two old cronies. I like that daughter of yours. She is the very image of you. There are some things she says which make one think that she has stolen your voice."

"So my husband often says."

As he watched them working in the glow of the lamplight, the thought that so often distressed him, that had tormented him during the day, the idea of his house, so empty, silent, dreary and cold, in spite of its glowing stoves and blazing hearths, tortured him as if he had never until that moment fully realised his lonely lot.

Ah! if only he could have been this woman's husband, and not merely her lover. In the old days he had longed to carry her off, snatch her from her husband, rob him of her for good and all. To-day he envied that injured husband, who had a right to be forever by her side, with his own place in the household, living with her on a footing of delicious intimacy. As he gazed at her, his heart was brimming over with these haunting emotions, which he longed to utter. In truth he still loved her dearly. To-day he actually loved her more, a great deal more, than he had done for a long time, and in his eagerness to tell her of this second blooming of his passion, which he knew would so rejoice her, he longed for Annette to be sent off to bed as soon as possible. Obsessed by his desire to be alone with her, to clasp her hands and make her drop the coverlet for the poor, the wooden needles and the ball of wool, which would roll away

under a chair, he kept glancing at the clock and he hardly spoke a word in his disgust at this absurd practice of letting little girls sit up with their elders.

Footsteps broke the silence of the room next door and the footman announced Monsieur de Musadieu.

Bertin suppressed a little spasm of rage, and as he shook hands with the Inspector of Fine Arts he felt inclined to take him by the shoulders and turn him out.

Musadieu was bursting with news; the Ministry was tottering to its fall, and there was a scandalous rumour about the Marquis de Rocdiane.

"I'll tell you about it presently," he added, with a glance at Annette.

The Countess looked at the clock and saw that it was close upon ten.

"It's time for bed, my dear," she said to her daughter.

Without a word, Annette folded her knitting, rolled up her ball of wool, and after kissing her mother and shaking hands with the two men, glided so swiftly from the room that she seemed hardly to stir the air around her.

"Now for your scandalous story," said the Countess, as soon as Annette had disappeared.

It was said that the Marquis de Rocdiane, who lived separated from his wife, by mutual consent, and received from her an allowance, which he considered inadequate, had adopted an unusual but effective method for doubling it. He had had the Marchioness shadowed; she had been caught *in flagrante delicto,* and had been obliged to purchase by means of a further allowance the withdrawal of a criminal prosecution. The Countess listened with an expression of interest, while the hands that held the knitting lay idle in her lap. Bertin, who, after Annette had gone to bed, had transferred his resentment to Musadieu, was up in arms, with the righteous indignation of a man who has heard, but has declined to pass on, a scandalous rumour. He declared that it was an infamous lie, one of those disgraceful fabrications that decent people ought never to listen to or repeat. He got up angrily and leaned against the mantel-

piece, with the excitement of a man ready to make the affair a personal matter.

Rocdiane, he said, was his friend, and though he might sometimes be guilty of levity, he could never be accused or suspected of any action which was positively dishonourable. Musadieu was surprised and taken aback, anxious to retract and to exculpate himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I have just heard the story in the Duchess de Mortemain's drawing-room."

"Who told you? Some woman, I suppose."

"Not at all, the Marquis de Farandal."

"I can well believe it," snapped Bertin.

There was a silence. The Countess resumed her knitting.

Then Bertin remarked in calmer tones:

"I know for a fact that it's not true."

He really knew nothing whatever about it; this was the first he had heard of the incident.

Musadieu, who felt that there was danger in the air, was beginning to prepare his retreat, and was already talking of moving on to the Corbelles, when Count de Guilleroy came in from dining out.

In despair, Oliver relapsed into his seat. Here was an intruder of whom he could never hope to rid himself.

"Have you heard the scandal that's going about to-night?" asked Guilleroy.

No one answered, and he continued:

"Apparently Rocdiane caught his wife in a very delicate situation and made her pay dearly for her indiscretion."

With a pained expression on his face, his tone and gestures eloquent of distress, Oliver laid his hand on Guilleroy's knee and repeated in temperate and amicable language everything that he had a moment ago hurled at Musadieu's head. Partly convinced, vexed with himself for having lightly given currency to a doubtful story which might even be actionable, Guilleroy pleaded his ignorance and good faith. Really people did spread a pack of wicked lies!

Suddenly they all agreed with one consent that society had a deplorable propensity for circulating rumours, suspicions, and slanders. For at least five minutes, all four of them seemed firmly convinced that every breath of scandal was invariably false, that women never had the lovers ascribed to them, that men were never guilty of the disgraceful actions laid to their charge, and that, in short, the appearance of things was far worse than the reality.

Now that Guilleroy had arrived on the scene, Bertin forgave Musadieu, soothed his vanity, led up to his favourite subjects of conversation and opened the sluices of his loquacity. The Count wore the complacent aspect of a man who brings with him peace and goodwill wherever he goes.

Two footmen, moving noiselessly over the thick carpets, brought in a tea-table with a brightly polished kettle, steaming over the blue flame of a spirit lamp. The Countess rose and made the tea with all the rites and ceremonies we have borrowed from the Russians. She offered a cup to Musadieu and another to Bertin, and handed round plates of *pâté de foie gras* sandwiches and small English and Austrian cakes. The Count went to the table, which bore an array of tumblers, syrups, spirits and liqueurs; mixed himself a peg and then quietly slipped away through the adjoining room.

Once more Musadieu had become Oliver's only obstacle, and he was seized again with his former impulse to eject this tiresome fellow, who had now got into his swing and was delivering himself of perorations, anecdotes and witticisms, original and otherwise. Bertin kept looking at the clock, the hands of which were close on midnight. Quick to interpret his glance, the Countess realised that he wanted to talk to her, and with the tact of society women, who can, by a slight difference in manner, change the tone of a conversation and the atmosphere of a drawing-room and silently convey to a guest her wish that he should go or stay, she infused by the languor of her attitude, the expression on her face, the boredom in her eyes, a chilliness into the air, as if she had opened a window. Musadieu's flow of

ideas was frozen by this icy breath, and without pausing to analyse it, he felt an impulse to rise and go.

For the sake of appearances, Bertin followed his example. Together the two men passed through the adjoining drawing-room, with the Countess following close behind them, still engaged in talking to Oliver. On the threshold of the ante-room she involved him in some discussion, while a footman was helping Musadieu into his overcoat. As Madame de Guilleroy continued her conversation with Bertin, the Inspector of Fine Arts waited for some moments at the hall door, which was held open by the second footman; at last seeing himself reduced to a tête-à-tête with the servant, he took his departure alone.

The door closed gently behind Musadieu, and the Countess at once said to Bertin, in the most natural way:

"But why should you run away so soon? It's not twelve o'clock yet. Do stay a little longer."

They returned to the boudoir, and sat down.

"Good Lord, how that idiot annoyed me," exclaimed Oliver.

"Why?"

"I don't like sharing you with him."

"I didn't give him much."

"I daresay, but he bored me."

"Are you jealous?"

"It's not jealousy to find a man in the way."

He drew the low armchair close to her side, and as he smoothed the silk of her gown, he spoke to her of that warm wave of emotion which had swept over his heart that day. Surprised and delighted, she listened to him, and gently laying her hand on his white hair, stroked it, as if in gratitude.

"I do wish I could always be with you," he murmured, still thinking of her husband, who was doubtless in bed and asleep in a room close by. "There is no real union except in marriage."

"Poor darling!" she whispered, full of pity for herself as well as for him.

His cheek rested against her knee, and he gazed up at her with a tenderness tinged with melancholy and regret, less ardent now than he had been a moment ago in the embarrassing presence of her husband, her daughter and Musadieu. As her fingers moved caressingly through his locks, she said with a smile:

"Dear me, how white you are! You haven't a single black hair left."

"I know," he said ruefully, "it's a rapid process."

"Yes, but you went grey very young, you know," she replied, fearing that she had hurt him; "your hair had more than a touch of white when I first met you."

"That's true."

To banish completely the shadow she had evoked, she bent down and raising his head in her hands, printed upon his forehead tender, lingering kisses, those kisses that a lover would fain prolong to eternity. They gazed deep into each other's eyes, seeking there a reflection of their love.

"I wish I could spend a whole day with you," he said.

He was tortured by vague and indescribable yearnings for real companionship. A little while ago he had imagined that if only the others would go away, the craving that had come over him that morning would be satisfied. But now that he was alone with his mistress, with her hands warm upon his brow, and, through her gown, her body warm against his cheek, he was still haunted with the same restlessness, the same strange, elusive hunger for love. And now he felt that if only they were out of the house, alone together in the depths of the woods, with no one near them, his troubled heart might find peace.

"What a child you are!" she replied. "Why, we see each other nearly every day."

He begged her to contrive to lunch with him one day in some restaurant on the outskirts of Paris, as she had done four or five times before. She was surprised at this fancy of his, which it was not easy to gratify, now that Annette was at home. She promised, however, to do her best, when her husband went to Ronces, but in any case it was im-

possible before Varnishing Day, which was fixed for the following Saturday.

"And in the meantime, when shall I see you?" he asked.

"To-morrow evening at the Corbelles. And if you are not engaged, you can come here on Thursday at three, and I think we are both dining with the Duchess next Friday."

"Yes, so we are."

He rose to go.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear friend," she replied.

He stood there irresolute. Almost everything he had come to tell her remained unsaid; his mind was burdened with thoughts that he could not express, bursting with vague and pent-up emotion.

"Good-bye," he repeated, clasping her hands.

"Good-bye, dear friend."

"I love you."

She gave him a smile, such a smile as reveals to a man, in a single flash, the sum of all that a woman has bestowed upon him.

With beating heart he said yet again:

"Good-bye."

Then he went from the room.

IV

Every carriage in Paris seemed bound on a pilgrimage to the Palais de l'Industrie. From nine in the morning, by every street, avenue and bridge, steady streams of vehicles converged upon that mart of the Fine Arts, whither all the fashionable world of Paris had been bidden by the whole artistic community, on the occasion of the so-called varnishing of three thousand four hundred pictures.

A long queue of visitors was filing in at every door. Without so much as a glance at the sculpture, they hastened upstairs to the picture galleries. Even while they climbed the steps their eyes were busy with the canvases exhibited on the walls of the great staircase, which was reserved for a special class, the lobby men, who sent in either works of an inconvenient size, or efforts which the Committee did not venture to reject. The Square Room was a seething, chattering mass of humanity. The artists, who were on view from morning till evening, were conspicuous by their energy, their resonant voices and authoritative gestures.

Some of them, spirited counterfeits of the connoisseur, were already button-holing their friends and dragging them off to look at various pictures, which they indicated with vigorous gestures and ejaculations. Every type of artist was represented. There were tall men with long hair, wearing soft, shapeless hats of black or grey, as big as a roof with brims like eaves that threw the wearer into shadow; there were small men, bustling men, thin men, dumpy men,

some with foulard ties, some in jackets, some in the curious baggy garments affected by the fraternity of daubers. There was the fashionable set, the dandies who haunt the boulevards; the Academic set, correctly attired, and adorned with red rosettes, which varied in size from the gigantic to the minute, according to their owners' ideas of good taste; the bourgeois set, escorted by their offspring, who surrounded their progenitors like a triumphal chorus.

The pictures that had been accorded the place of honour on the four immense panels of the Square Room, dazzled the in-coming visitor with the clash of tones, the glitter of gold frames, the crudity of fresh pigments, heightened by varnishing and rendered positively blinding by the merciless glare from the top-lighting.

Opposite the door hung a portrait of the President of the Republic. On another wall a General, all gold lace, red cloth and ostrich plumes, was flanked by nymphs wandering naked under willow trees, and by a ship in distress, wallowing in the trough of the sea.

There was a Bishop of olden days excommunicating a barbarian king, an Eastern street full of plague-stricken corpses, the Shade of Dante in the Inferno; all challenging attention by the startling violence of their emphasis. Besides these, the great room contained a cavalry charge, skirmishers in a wood, cows in a meadow, two gentlemen of the 18th century fighting a duel at a street corner, an idiot girl on a milestone, a priest administering the sacrament to a dying man; harvesters, rivers, a sunset, a moonlight night: samples, in short, of every manifestation of man or nature, of every kind of picture, which artists have ever produced and will go on producing till the Day of Judgment.

Oliver was discussing the exhibition with a group of distinguished brother artists, members of the Institute and of the Jury. He was feeling uneasy about his own exhibit and, in spite of the enthusiastic congratulations he had received, remained doubtful of its success.

As the Duchess de Mortemain appeared in the doorway he darted forward to meet her.

"Isn't the Countess here yet?" said the Duchess.

"I have not seen her."

"Nor Monsieur de Musadieu?"

"No."

"He promised to meet me at the top of the staircase at ten o'clock to show me round the Galleries."

"Will you allow me to take his place?"

"No, no. You must not desert your friends. We shall meet again presently. I am counting on your lunching with me."

Musadieu came hurrying up, out of breath and full of apologies. Someone had detained him in the sculpture gallery downstairs.

"This way, Duchess, this way. We'll begin with the rooms on the right."

As they were sucked into the vortex, the Countess de Guilleroy arrived, with her daughter on her arm, and looked round for Oliver Bertin.

He caught sight of them and bowed, and as he went towards them, he said to himself:

"By Jove, they're a handsome pair. Nannette is really growing very pretty. Even a week has made a difference to her."

He studied her with the eye of a trained observer.

"The lines of her figure are softer," he reflected, "less pronounced, and her complexion is more brilliant. There's far less of the school-girl about her and much more of the finished product."

He returned to the proper business of the day.

"We'll begin with the rooms on the right and catch up the Duchess."

Thoroughly versed in everything to do with painting, and as much interested as if she herself were exhibiting, she asked:

"What do people think?"

"A fine Salon. A remarkable Bonnat, two excellent Carolus Durans, an admirable Puvis de Chavannes, a very startling and original Roll, an exquisite Gervex, and many

more; some Bérauds, Cazins, and Duez—any number of good things."

"What about your own?"

"People have been congratulating me, but I'm not satisfied with it."

"You never are."

"Yes, sometimes. But this time I'm afraid I'm right."

"Why so?"

"I can't explain."

"Let's go and look at it."

They found a group of admirers clustered around Bertin's picture of two little peasant girls, bathing in a stream.

The Countess was delighted.

"Why, it's ravishing," she whispered, "a perfect gem, the best you have ever done."

He pressed close to her side, in a gush of affection and gratitude for every word of hers, which stilled a pang, assuaged a wound. A dozen reasons flashed upon him in support of her opinion. She was a true Parisian, keen-sighted, intelligent; surely her judgment could be trusted. Eager for reassurance, he forgot how for twelve years he had criticised this same weakness of hers for the affected, the precious, the sophisticated; for obvious sentiment and the ephemeral influence of fashion—never Art for Art's sake, Art stripped of the ideas, tendencies, prejudices of society.

"Let's go on," he said, leading the way.

Happy in their companionship and sympathy, he took them through room after room, pointing out the best pictures and explaining the subjects.

"What's the time?" asked the Countess presently.

"Half past twelve."

"Then we must be off. The Duchess will be waiting for us at Ledoyen's. She told me to bring you to luncheon, if we didn't meet her in the Galleries."

The restaurant, which stood in a little oasis of shrubs and trees, was humming like an over-crowded beehive. Out

through the open windows and doors floated a confused buzz of conversation, mingled with shouts for the waiters, the clink of glasses, the clatter of plates. The tables, each with its party of hungry guests, were crowded together in long rows on either side of the narrow passages, along which the harassed and bewildered waiters were hurrying backwards and forwards, holding at arm's length, trays piled with dishes of meat, fish or fruit.

Under the gallery that ran all round the room, the crowd was so dense that it had the appearance of a squirming mass. And everyone was laughing and talking, eating and drinking, exhilarated with wine, and brimming over with that gaiety, which now and then descends upon Paris with days of bright sunshine.

A waiter showed the Countess, Annette and Bertin into a private room on the floor above, where the Duchess was waiting for them.

As soon as he entered, Bertin saw, standing beside the Duchess, the Marquis de Farandal, smiling and officious, ready to relieve the ladies of their cloaks and umbrellas. This annoyed him so much that he could barely refrain from being rude to him. Madame de Mortemain explained that her nephew had taken the place of Musadieu, who had been carried off by the Minister of Fine Arts.

At the thought that this coxcomb of a Marquis was to marry Annette, that he had come to the luncheon expressly to meet her, that he already regarded her as his destined spouse, Oliver felt as disgusted and indignant as if certain mysterious and sacred rights of his own had been infringed.

At table, the Marquis sat next to Annette and paid her the marked attentions of a man whose suit has the sanction of authority. He seemed to Oliver to subject her to an insolent scrutiny; his smile had an amorous fatuousness, his manner the familiar gallantry of a privileged suitor. There was something in his attitude and tones which suggested that a decision had been reached and that the announcement of his intention to enter into possession was imminent.

The Duchess and the Countess seemed to approve and encourage this attitude of the prospective husband, and they exchanged meaning glances, like fellow conspirators.

Immediately after luncheon they returned to the Exhibition. The rooms were so crowded that it seemed impossible to force an entrance. There was a dense and oppressive atmosphere of over-heated humanity and the sickly smell of gowns and of men's suits that had grown old upon their wearers. The pictures were neglected. Everyone was gazing at frocks and faces, and looking out for celebrities. Now and then there was a stir and the crowd opened for a moment to make way for the varnishers, who carried a step ladder and kept calling out:

"By your leave, gentlemen; by your leave, ladies."

Within five minutes, the Countess and Oliver found themselves separated from the rest of their party. He wanted to go in search of them, but she leaned on his arm and said:

"No, we're very happy as we are. Let them alone. It doesn't matter. We arranged to meet at the buffet at four if we lost sight of one another."

"True," he replied.

But he could not shake off the thought of the Marquis in attendance on Annette, and making love to her in his fatuous way.

"And so you still love me?" whispered the Countess.

"Indeed I do," he replied absently.

He was trying to make out the Marquis's grey hat, above the heads of the crowd.

She saw that his mind was wandering, and to recapture his attention, she said:

"You can't think how I love your picture this year. It's your masterpiece."

He smiled. The young people were forgotten, as he remembered his uneasiness earlier in the day.

"You really think so?"

"Yes. I prefer it to all your other work."

"It gave me a great deal of trouble."

Once more she wove about him the witchery of her praises. Long experience had taught her that nothing has such power over an artist as tender and continuous flattery. Captivated, comforted, cheered by her soothing words, he began to talk to her again, deaf and blind to everyone but her out of all that moving throng.

He murmured gratefully close to her ear:

"I am simply dying to kiss you."

A wave of warm emotion swept over her and raising her bright eyes to his, she repeated her question:

"Then you do love me still?"

"Yes, dearest, I love you," he said, and in his reply she detected that longed-for intonation, which had a moment before been missing from his words.

"Come often to see me," she said. "Come in the evening. I shall not be going out much, now that I have my daughter with me."

This unexpected reawakening of his affection thrilled her with a great and sudden happiness. The passing years, which had whitened her lover's locks, had tranquillized his passions, and she no longer feared that he would fall a victim to another woman. What she dreaded unspeakably was that his horror of a solitary life would lead him in the direction of matrimony. This fear had long haunted her and became ever more menacing. It gave birth in her mind to unrealisable plans, which would ensure his being near her as much as possible and would prevent him from spending long evenings in the chill silence of his empty house. She could hardly keep him every moment by her side, and she therefore suggested distractions to him, sending him to the theatre and forcing him to accept invitations. She preferred to picture him amid a throng of women rather than in the dreary solitude of his home.

Prompted by these unspoken reflections, she resumed:

"Oh if I could only keep you always to myself, how I should spoil you! I shall hardly ever be going out, so you must promise to come very often."

"I promise."

The Countess started at the sound of a gentle voice close to her ear. Turning she saw that Annette had rejoined them, with the Duchess and the Marquis.

"It is four o'clock," said the Duchess. "I am very tired and want to get away."

"I am going too," replied the Countess. "I have had enough of it."

They made towards the inner staircase which leads from the galleries in which the drawings and water-colours were displayed, down to the immense glass-roofed garden containing the sculpture. The landing at the head of this staircase commanded a complete view of the gigantic glass-house. Statues in great numbers had been placed along the paths and around the clumps of shrubs, and stood out above the dark throng, that eddied hither and thither over the walks like a restless wave. Jutting out through this sombre background of hats and coats, piercing it in a thousand places, the marble statues, in their intense whiteness, seemed by contrast to emit a sort of radiance.

At the exit, as Bertin was making his adieux to the ladies, Madame de Guilleroy murmured to him:

"You will be coming this evening?"

"Yes, certainly."

He then went back into the Exhibition with the idea of talking over his impressions with the artists. The painters and sculptors, holding apart in groups, either around the statues or in front of the buffet, renewed their perennial discussions, advancing the same old arguments for and against the same old ideas, in relation to works of art that were approximately identical with those of previous years. Oliver was usually an eager participant in these disputes. He had the knack of disconcerting his adversary with a shrewd hit, whether in defence or attack, and prided himself on his reputation as an imaginative theorist. On this occasion he tried to work himself up to his wonted state of excitement, but he found himself taking no interest either in the remarks of others or in his own mechanical rejoinders. He wanted to get away, to stop listening and troubling to

understand. Familiar with every aspect of these well-worn themes, he knew beforehand everything that could be said about them. None the less, his love for these things was genuine and had up to the present been almost exclusive of other interests. To-day, however, he was distracted by one of those slight but obstinate preoccupations, one of those anxieties, which are so petty that they hardly have any right to affect us, which haunt our every word and deed, and remain stuck in one's thoughts like a thorn that rankles, invisible, under the skin.

He had disliked the Marquis's demeanour towards Annette, and the recollection of this drove all other thoughts from his head, including even his worries about his "Bathers." But what concern was it of his after all? What right had he to be annoyed? Why should he have any desire to stand in the way of this cherished scheme, which had already been decided upon and was so suitable in every respect? But, reason with himself as he might, he could not rid himself of the discomforting sensation which had swept over him whenever he saw the Marquis de Farandal, whose words and smiles, and the lingering glances he cast upon Annette, were those of an affianced lover. When he paid his evening visit to the Countess and found her and her daughter working away by lamplight at their knitting for the poor, it was all he could do to refrain from poking fun at the Marquis and revealing to Annette the commonplace mind that lay hidden under that dashing exterior.

During these after-dinner visits he had for some time past been indulging in periods of silence not free from drowsiness. He had yielded to the negligent ways of the old friend who need not put himself out. Comfortably ensconced in his arm-chair, he would cross his legs, and lean his head back; his talk acquired the character of a reverie; both mind and body found repose in this tranquil intimacy. Now suddenly he regained all the alertness and activity of those men who will spend themselves in the effort to please, whose remarks are considered before they

are uttered, whom the presence of certain individuals impels to seek for words of greater brilliance or nicety, with which to deck their sentiments and render them more attractive. No longer would he allow the conversation to flag; he gave it continuity and briskness by administering a stimulating fillip to it, and he found his reward in the thrill of pleasure, the tremor of elation, which he felt, when he had made the Countess and her daughter break into a hearty laugh, or when he was conscious that he had touched their emotions, or when he saw them raising astonished eyes, or stopping their work in order to listen to him. He came whenever he knew they would be alone, and never perhaps had he passed such delightful evenings.

Madame de Guilleroy, whose constant apprehensions were calmed by this fidelity, made every effort to attract and hold him. She refused to go to dinners, balls and plays, simply for the joy of being able, when she went out at three o'clock, to throw into the telegraph box the little blue paper with its two words of invitation. At the beginning of this period, in her desire to accede as quickly as possible to his wish to be alone with her, she would send her daughter away to bed on the first stroke of ten. Noticing, however, one day that he was astonished at this and that he laughingly begged her not to treat Annette any longer like a troublesome little girl, she granted her a quarter of an hour's grace, which grew to half-an-hour and then to a full hour. Furthermore he never stayed for long after Annette had gone away. It was as if in leaving the room she had taken with her a half of the charm which retained him there. He immediately drew up the little armchair which he preferred, and seated himself at the Countess's feet. From time to time, with a caressing movement, he rested his cheek against her knee, and she gave him her hand to hold. At that the fever of his spirit would quickly abate; he would cease talking and would seem to be enjoying, in a tender silence, a rest from the effort he had been making.

Her feminine intuition gradually apprised her of the fact that Annette attracted him almost as much as herself, but

the knowledge did not disturb her. She was happy that he could find, between her and her daughter, something of the family life of which she had deprived him, and she kept him as close a prisoner as possible between them, playing the rôle of mother so that he might almost come to believe himself the father of this girl, and thus be tied to the house by yet another strand of affection.

Her desire to attract him was ever awake, but it gained a new alertness from her uneasy consciousness of the advance of old age, which delivered on all sides its as yet almost imperceptible attacks, like tiny but innumerable pin-pricks. With the idea of becoming as slim as Annette, she continued to refrain from drinking at meals, and her figure became really slighter in consequence; the contours of her girlhood were restored to such effect that seen from behind she was hardly distinguishable from her daughter. In the thinness of her face, however, she paid the penalty for the new regimen. The skin, relieved from tension, became wrinkled and acquired a sallowness by contrast with which the superb freshness of her daughter's complexion gained an added radiance.

She next had recourse to the expedients of stage make-up, and although the results she obtained were not fully convincing by broad daylight, yet by lamp-light her face had that artificial and seductive brilliance, those incomparable tints which are the reward of successful effort.

Reluctantly convinced of the decline in her beauty, and driven to the use of artificial palliatives, she was obliged at the same time to make an alteration in her habits. As far as possible she avoided broad daylight; but on the other hand, she courted comparison by lamplight, where she was at an advantage. When she felt fatigued, pale, and older than usual, she would plead a convenient headache as a pretext for missing an engagement at a ball or a theatre, but on the days when she felt at her best she was triumphant, and while she played at being elder sister she had the demure modesty of the young mother. In order always to have gowns as similar as possible to those of her daughter she

dressed her somewhat in advance of her years, and Annette, who displayed ever-increasing signs of a joyous and mirthful temperament, carried off these costumes with a sparkling vivacity which added to her dainty charm. She abetted her mother's coquettish devices with all her heart, and as though by instinct played up to her in graceful little situations, kissed her at the right moment, passed her arm tenderly round her waist, and showed by some gesture or caress, some clever improvisation, how attractive they both were, and how like each other.

By dint of seeing them together and continually comparing them with each other, Oliver came at times hardly to know which was which. Sometimes, if he happened to be looking in another direction while Annette was talking, he had to ask who had spoken. He frequently went so far as to amuse himself by playing this game of not knowing one from the other when they were all three by themselves in the drawing-room with the Louis XV hangings. Shutting his eyes, he asked them to put the same question to him one after the other, and then to repeat the question, changing the order in which they spoke, to see if he could distinguish between their voices, and they managed so cleverly to hit upon similar intonations and repeat the same phrases in the same accents, that he often failed to guess. Their tones became in fact so indistinguishable that the servants would answer "Yes, Madame" to the daughter, and "Yes, Mademoiselle" to the mother.

Begun as a joke, this habit of imitating each other and copying each other's movements, made them so similar in gait and gestures that Monsieur de Guilleroy himself continually failed to distinguish between them when the one or the other moved across the unlighted end of the drawing-room, and he would call out:

"Is that you, Annette, or your mother?"

This resemblance, which was at once natural and studied, real and artificial, begat in the painter's mind and affections a quaint conception of a duplicate being, old and new, well-known and yet strange, of two bodies made one after the

other out of the same flesh, of the same woman, thrown forward into the years, and then drawn back into youth and resuming her former state. Thus divided between them, he passed his time by their side, vaguely disturbed, feeling his reawakened ardour for the mother and cherishing towards the daughter a tenderness not easy to define.

PART II

II

Paris, 11 p.m., July 20th.

"Dear Friend,

I have just heard of my mother's death at Roncières, and we are leaving at midnight. No one has been told, so do not come to me. But think of me and be sorry for me.

Ever yours,

ANNIE.

Noon, July 21st.

"My Poor Darling,

In spite of what you said I should have followed you to Roncières. But your wish has always been my law. Ever since yesterday, I have been thinking of you with intense pain, imagining that silent journey last night, when you sat facing your husband and daughter in the dimly lighted train which was carrying you to your beloved dead. I pictured the three of you in the light of the lamp overhead, you in tears, Annette sobbing; then your arrival at the station, the agonising drive to the château, your reception by the servants, the passionate haste with which you rushed up the stairs to the room where she reposes, your first glance at her, the kiss that you bestowed upon that still and wasted countenance. And I felt for that heavy heart of yours, that poor aching heart which is half my own, that broken, suffering heart, whose agonies I share. I kiss your dear eyes, so full of tears.

In deepest sympathy,

OLIVER."

Roncières, July 24th.

"If anything could comfort me, dear friend, in my bitter sorrow, it would have been your letter. She was buried yesterday, and ever since her poor lifeless body was borne from the house, I have felt all alone in the world. One loves one's mother almost unconsciously, almost unthinkingly, because it is an instinct as natural as life itself, and one does not realise how deep are the roots of this love, until the moment of eternal farewell. Nothing can be compared to it. Our other later affections are casual things, imposed upon us by the hazards of life, but this feeling is born in us and is mingled in our blood with the first breath we draw. And then, and then—we lose not only our mother, but one half of our whole childhood vanishes with her, all our little, girlish life, which belonged as much to her as to us. She alone knew what we knew, all the trivial, precious things of long ago, which were, which still are, the first tender emotions of our hearts. To whom but her could I say:

'You remember that day, Mother, when——'

'You remember that china doll, Mother, that Grandmamma gave me?'

Together we would tell over the long and cherished chaplet of tiny, delectable memories, which no one on earth now shares with me. And so one part of me has perished with her, the earliest and the best. I have lost for ever that beloved heart in which the little girl, who was myself, still lived on unchanged. No one knows her now, no one remembers little Anne with her short petticoats, her laughter, her baby ways.

And the day will come—perhaps at no very distant date—when I too shall be called away, leaving my dear Annette alone in the world, just as my mother leaves me to-day. How sad it all is, how hard, how cruel! And yet we never give it a thought. We never notice how every moment of the day death seizes upon some victim, as it will soon seize upon ourselves. If we did heed it and think about it, if we were not distracted, cheered and dazzled by everything that

goes on around us, life would be unbearable, for the sight of this unending massacre would send us mad.

I am absolutely prostrate, so broken with grief, that I have no strength left for anything. Day and night I keep thinking of my poor mother, nailed down in that wooden box, buried deep in the earth, out in that field with the rain beating down upon her, and her darling old face, which I so loved to kiss, one mass of horrible corruption. Oh how terrible it is!

When I lost papa, I was newly married, and I did not feel things as keenly as I do to-day. Ah yes, pity me, think of me, write to me. I need you so.

ANNE."

Paris, July 25th.

My Poor Love,

Your sorrow is agony to me. But, for me, too, life is not all roses. Since your departure I have felt utterly lost and forlorn, without a single tie, a single resource. Everything is weariness and vexation of spirit. I can do nothing but think of you and our dear Annette, and you both seem very far away just when I need you near me. It is extraordinary how remote you seem, and how desperately I miss you. Never before, not even in the days when I was young, have you been so completely all in all to me, as now. For some time past I have felt this attack coming on. Can it be that my St Martin's summer has given me sunstroke? My symptoms are so curious that I must tell you about them. Just imagine ever since you went away, I simply cannot bring myself to take a walk. Until lately I have always loved wandering about the streets, amused by everything I saw; I enjoyed looking about me and hearing the cheerful ring of my heel upon the pavement. I used to stroll straight ahead, not caring where I went, just for the sake of exercising my legs and lungs and imagination. And now I simply can't do it. As soon as I set foot in the street, I am seized with a feeling of desolation like a blind man who has lost his dog. I am as uneasy as a traveller in a forest

who has missed the path, and I have to go home. Paris feels to me empty, grim and menacing. I say to myself, 'Where am I going?' and the reply is 'Nowhere in particular. I am only out for a walk.' Well, I cannot do it now. I simply cannot go out for a walk without some object. At the mere idea of putting one foot before the other, I feel absolutely prostrate and overwhelmed with weariness and disgust. So then I take myself and my blue devils off to the Club.

And do you know the reason? It's simple and solely because you are not here. I am perfectly convinced of it. When I know that you are in Paris, no walk is aimless, because there is always the chance of meeting you as soon as I set foot on the pavement. It doesn't matter where I go, because wherever I go, I may see you. And if I don't catch a glimpse of you in person, I may at least meet Annette, who is an emanation of yourself. The two of you fill the streets with hope—the hope of meeting you, of seeing you coming towards me in the distance, or of sighting you from afar and catching you up. And all at once the whole city is charming; all the women, who have a look of you, set my heart pulsing with the life of the busy streets, keep me on the alert, occupy my eyes and whet my eagerness to see you.

You will think me a terrible egoist, my poor darling, cooing about my loneliness like an old turtle dove, while you are shedding such bitter tears. Forgive me. You have spoilt me so completely, that I cry for help, when you are away from me.

I kiss your dear feet, so that you may take pity upon me.

OLIVER."

Roncières, July 30th.

"Dear Friend,

Thank you for your letter. It is such a comfort to know that you love me. I have lived through terrible days. I felt that I too should die of grief. The pain was like something hard and solid within my bosom, swelling and swelling

till it almost choked me. The doctor who was summoned to relieve the nerve storms that attacked me four or five times a day, gave me injections of morphia, which almost drove me mad, and the terrible heat we are having made me worse and reduced me to a state of morbid excitement, verging on delirium. The severe thunderstorm on Friday brought me some relief. I must tell you that since the day of the funeral I had shed no tears, but during the thunderstorm, the approach of which had prostrated me, I suddenly felt them rising slowly to my eyes in small burning drops. O those first tears, how they hurt! They tore at me like claws; my throat was so tight that I could hardly breathe. Presently they began to flow more freely in larger, warmer drops, till my eyes were streaming like fountains, and drenched one handkerchief after another. The lump in my bosom seemed to soften and dissolve in my tears.

From that moment I have wept incessantly from morning till night and my tears have saved me. One would certainly go mad or die, if one could not weep. I too am very lonely. My husband roams all over the country and I make him take Annette to distract her and cheer him up. They go for twenty-mile drives or rides, and in spite of her grief, she comes back to me rosy with youth, her eyes sparkling with life, radiant with fresh air and exercise. How lovely to be her age! We shall probably stay here another fortnight or three weeks, and then, although it will be August, return to Paris—you know why.

I send you all that is left of my heart.

ANNE."

Paris, August 4th.

"I can stand it no longer, dear love; you simply must come back, or something will certainly happen to me. I sometimes wonder if I am ill. I have a perfect horror of all the things I have hitherto done with a certain pleasure, or at least with resigned indifference. To begin with, it is so appallingly hot in Paris, that every night is like spending eight or nine hours in a Turkish bath. I get up in the

morning utterly exhausted after sleeping in a hot-room, and for a couple of hours I walk up and down in front of a blank canvas, with the idea of sketching something or other on it. But everything is barren: mind, eye and hand. I have ceased to be a painter. This futile attempt at work is maddening. I send for models and make them pose, but when they assume the same old attitudes, gestures and expressions, which I have painted till I am sick of them, I tell them to get dressed and clear out. It is a fact that I cannot obtain a single new impression, and I worry about it as if I were going blind. What is the matter? Lassitude of eye or brain, exhaustion of the artistic faculty, or paralysis of the optic nerve? God knows. I feel that I have come to the end of that unexplored corner of the earth, which was allotted to me. I can see no more now than ordinary people. I am no better than any other dauber. I have as much insight and observation as a yokel. Only a little while ago, my stock of new ideas seemed inexhaustible, and my only difficulty was to make my selection. And now, all of a sudden, my world, which was teeming with half-divined subjects, has become a desert, my explorations are fruitless and barren. The people in the street mean nothing to me now. I no longer see in every human being the character, the raciness, which I used to delight in detecting and interpreting. But I do believe that I could paint a charming portrait of your daughter. Is it because she is so like you that I keep confusing the two of you in my thoughts? That must be it.

Well, after endeavouring to sketch some man or woman, not absolutely identical with every well known model, I make up my mind to go out to luncheon, for I can no longer bear to sit in solitary state in my own dining-room. The Boulevard Malesherbes looks like some forest avenue imprisoned in the heart of a deserted city. All the houses have an air of desolation. Men are spraying the roadways with silvery jets of water and the mud that forms on the wooden pavements gives off a smell of wet tar and of washed-down stables. From one end to the other of the

long sloping stretch between Park Monceau and St Augustin's there is not a soul to be seen, except half a dozen sombre forms of no interest whatever, servants or tradespeople. The plane trees cast upon the scorching side walks grotesque shadows, which have a liquid look, like splashes of water, gradually drying up. The stillness of the leaves on the branches, of their grey silhouettes on the asphalt, bears witness to the exhaustion of the parched and drowsy city which sweats like a workman asleep on a bench in the sun. Yes, she is all a-sweat, the slut, and a horrible stench rises from the air-holes of the drains, the ventilators of cellars and kitchens, from the gutters, running with all the filth of the streets. And then I think of summer mornings in your orchard, covered with little wild flowers which fill the air with the scent of honey. Sick and disgusted I enter a restaurant and see a lot of fat, bald-headed men seated at a table in a state of exhaustion, their waistcoats unbuttoned, their foreheads gleaming with moisture. All the food seems to be feeling the heat. The iced melons are melting, the bread is flabby, the beef steak limp, the vegetables overdone, the cheese putrescent, and the fruit stale. With a feeling of loathing I rise and go home and try to snatch a little sleep till dinner time, when I go to the club.

There I invariably meet Adelmans, Maldant, Rocdiane, Landa, and all the other fellows who bore me and weary me like so many barrel-organs, each with his own particular tune or tunes, which I have heard over and over again for the last fifteen years. Every evening they grind them out in concert. And that's the club, which calls itself a place of recreation. I wish I could transfer myself to a new generation, my eyes and ears and mind are so sick of my own. And they still go on boasting of their conquests, these fellows, and congratulating one another.

After yawning at least once every minute between eight o'clock and twelve, I return home, and go to bed, thinking to myself that the whole weary business will begin again to-morrow.

The truth is, my love, I have reached the age when a

bachelor existence becomes intolerable, because there is nothing new to me under the sun. A bachelor should be young, and eager, and inquisitive. But once a man loses these qualities, freedom becomes dangerous. Heavens, how I loved my freedom, in the old days, before I learned to love you even better! What a burden it is to me to-day! To an old bachelor like myself freedom is a void, a universal void; it is the high road to death with nothing to conceal the ultimate end. It's an everlasting question, what to do with oneself; whom to go and see, so as to avoid one's own company. I wander from friend to friend, shaking hands here and there, and begging for a little human kindness. I gather up the crumbs, but there is no satisfaction in them.

I have you, I have you, my love, but you are not my very own. Perhaps you are actually at the root of these agonies I am suffering. It is this yearning to be near you, this longing for your presence, this desire to have the same roof above us, the same walls around us, the same interests uniting our hearts; this need of common hopes, troubles, pleasures, joys, sorrows and material things, which so torments me. You are mine. That is to say, I steal a little of you from time to time. But I want always to breathe the same air as yourself, to share everything with you, to feel that everything I touch belongs to both of us, that every necessity of life is yours as much as mine, the glass from which I drink, the chair in which I rest, the bread I eat, the fire at which I warm myself.

Farewell. Come back soon, very soon; I cannot live without you. OLIVER."

Roncières, August 8th.

" Dear Friend,

I am so ill and worn out that you would hardly recognise me. I think I have shed too many tears. Before I return to you, I must rest a little; I could not let you see me as I am now. My husband is going to Paris the day after to-morrow and will give you news of us. He wants you to dine with him, and I am to ask you to wait for him at

your house about seven o'clock. I am really feeling a little better, and as soon as I look less like a ghost, I will come back to you. At present my own face frightens me. I have no one in the world but Annette and you, and I want to give each of you all that I can without robbing the other.

These poor eyes of mine, that have wept so much, long for your kisses. ANNE."

When he received this letter, once more postponing her return, Oliver could hardly resist the impulse to drive to the station and take the train to Roncières. Then, reflecting that Monsieur de Guilleroy was coming to Paris the following day, he resigned himself, and looked forward to the husband's arrival almost as impatiently as if it had been the wife's. He had never felt so fond of Guilleroy as during these twenty-four hours of anticipation.

As soon as the Count entered the room Oliver sprang towards him with outstretched hands.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "how delighted I am to see you."

His friend seemed equally charmed. He was only too glad to be back in Paris, for life had not been very cheerful those last three weeks in Normandy. The two men seated themselves on a little sofa in a corner of the studio under a canopy of Oriental draperies. Again they clasped each other's hands and pressed them with emotion and affection.

"And how is the Countess?" asked Bertin.

"Not very well. Her mother's death was a great blow to her, a great shock, and she is not recovering as quickly as she should. I confess that I feel a little uneasy about her."

"But why won't she come back to Paris?"

"I have no idea. I could not persuade her to come."

"What does she do with herself all day long?"

"Do? Why, nothing but think of her mother and cry. It is not at all good for her. I only wish she would make up her mind to have a change of air, you know, and get away from the place where it happened."

"And Annette?"

"Oh, she's blooming like a rose."

Oliver smiled with pleasure.

"Was she very unhappy?" he pursued.

"Yes, very. But, you know, the sorrows of eighteen are soon forgotten."

There was a silence. Then Guilleroy resumed:

"Where shall we dine, my dear fellow? I want brightening up. A little cheerful bustle and noise will do me good."

"Well, at this time of the year, I think the *Café des Ambassadeurs* is indicated."

Arm in arm they strolled in the direction of the Champs Elysées. Guilleroy felt that thrill of awakening, experienced by the true Parisian when he returns to his city, which, since his absence, seems to him rejuvenated and palpitating with mystery. Guilleroy asked him endless questions about everything that had been said and done while he was away, while Oliver, whose listless replies expressed all the tedium of his solitary existence, talked about Roncières and endeavoured to catch from his companion, to absorb from his proximity, that almost tangible something, which people whom we have seen, bequeath to us, that subtle emanation we carry away with us and preserve for a few hours until it fades away in an alien atmosphere.

The sultry sky of a summer evening brooded over the city and the broad avenue, where gay snatches of melody were stealing in and out among the trees from the open air concerts that were just beginning. From the balcony of the *Café des Ambassadeurs* the two men looked down upon the as yet unoccupied benches and chairs within the enclosure in front of the little stage, where in mingled electric light and daylight the singers displayed their dazzling gowns, their rosy arms and bosoms. The smell of frying, the aroma of sauces and hot comestibles floated upon the light breaths of air which were wafted among the chestnut trees, and whenever a pair in evening dress swept past, looking for their reserved places, the woman left in her wake the delicious and heady perfume of her draperies and of her person.

"I would rather be here than in the country," exclaimed Guilleroy ecstatically.

"For my part I would rather be in the country than here," replied Bertin.

"You don't say so."

"Upon my soul, Paris is positively pestilential this summer."

"What of that, my dear fellow? Paris is always Paris."

Guilleroy seemed to be enjoying a day of perfect bliss, one of those rare days of lively effervescence, when sober men lose their heads. He eyed two cocottes who were dining at the next table with three slim and exquisite young men, and he slily questioned Oliver about all the well-known and popular courtesans, whose names he heard mentioned every day.

"How lucky you are," he exclaimed in tones of deep regret, "to have remained a bachelor. There's so much that you can see and do."

But Oliver protested, and after the manner of men obsessed by a single idea, he began to confide to Guilleroy his depression and his loneliness. When he had come to the end of this recital of his sorrows and had relieved his feelings by explaining ingenuously how greatly he would have appreciated the love and the gracious presence of a woman in his life, the Count agreed that there was something to be said for marriage. With a burst of parliamentary eloquence he boasted of his domestic joys, and sang the Countess's praises, while Oliver kept solemnly nodding his approval. Although it was a delight to hear him speak of her, Oliver felt jealous of that happy intimacy, which Guilleroy was dutifully celebrating, and at last he exclaimed with deep conviction:

"Yes, you're a lucky fellow, you are."

Guilleroy complacently agreed.

"I only wish she would return," he said. "I really feel anxious about her. Now as you are bored with Paris, why don't you go to Roncières and bring her back? She would

listen to you, because you are her best friend, while a mere husband, you know . . . ."

"Why, nothing would please me more," exclaimed Oliver rapturously. "But are you sure she would not be put out if I suddenly descended upon her like that?"

"Not in the least. Go, by all means, my dear fellow."

"Very well, I will. I'll go by the one o'clock train to-morrow Shall I send her a telegram?"

"No. I'll see to that. I will let her know that you are coming, so that there will be a carriage to meet you at the station."

After dinner they strolled back to the boulevards, but after a brief half hour the Count suddenly left Oliver, on the plea of some urgent engagement, which he had only that moment remembered.

II

The Countess and her daughter, dressed in deep mourning, had just sat down to luncheon in the great dining-room at Roncières. Upon the walls, in ancient frames from which the gilt was peeling, hung a series of artlessly painted family portraits, representing past generations of Guilleroys, here an ancestor in a breast-plate, there another in a jerkin, a third with the powdered hair of an officer of the French Guards, a fourth in the uniform of a Colonel of the Restoration. Two servants were noiselessly waiting on the ladies. Around the crystal chandelier above the table clustered a swarm of flies, a little cloud of whirring, buzzing black specks.

"Open the windows," said the Countess. "It is chilly in here."

The double doors of the three French windows, which were unusually wide and reached from the floor to the ceiling, were thrown open, and in rushed a gust of warm air, bringing with it far away pastoral sounds and the scent of sun-dried grass, which mingled with the damp atmosphere of the spacious room in the thick-walled château.

"How delicious!" said Annette, drawing a deep breath.

The two women turned to look at the outside world, where, beneath a sky of pure azure, faintly veiled by the noonday haze, shimmering above the sun-steeped earth, lay the park with its great expanse of grass, its groves of trees and its vistas, revealing the distant landscape, radiant to the far horizon in the cloth-of-gold of the ripening harvest.

"After luncheon we will have a good walk," said the

Countess. "We can stroll along the river as far as Berville; it would be too hot on the common."

"Yes, Mamma, and we'll take Julio to put up partridges."

"You know your father has forbidden it."

"Yes, but Papa is in Paris and it is such fun to see Julio putting up game. Look at him teasing the cows. Isn't he funny?"

Pushing back her chair, she ran to the window and called out:

"Go it, Julio, go it!"

Three massive cows, filled to repletion with grass and torpid with the heat, were lying on their sides, the pressure of the ground beneath them throwing into greater prominence their large round bellies. Barking and gambolling deliriously, in a frenzy of joy and playful fury, his silken ears flapping at each bound, a graceful red and white spaniel was darting from one to the other, making desperate efforts to stir up the three fat, lethargic beasts. This was the spaniel's favourite game, and he indulged in it whenever he saw the cows lying down. Annoyed, but not in the least afraid, they stared at him with great liquid eyes, turning their heads to watch his manœuvres.

"At them, Julio, at them!" called Annette from the window.

Excited and encouraged by her voice, the spaniel grew bolder. Barking more fiercely than ever, he ventured nearer and pretended to snap at their rumps. The cows grew restless, and kept nervously twitching their skin, as if to drive away the flies. At last a rush which he could not control carried him so far that to avoid colliding with one of the cows he had to leap over her. He brushed her back as he jumped and startled her. Raising her head and snorting, she heaved her great bulk up on all fours; the other cows followed her example, and Julio danced round them in triumph while Annette praised him:

"Bravo, Julio, bravo."

"Come, my dear," said the Countess. "Do have some luncheon."

Shading her eyes with her hand, Annette exclaimed:

"Why, there's the telegraph boy."

Moving along the path, which was hidden among the wheat and oats, a blue smock was seen bobbing up and down as its wearer walked through the crops towards the château.

"Good Heavens," murmured the Countess. "No bad news, I hope."

She was still palpitating with the terror that haunts us for many a day after receiving by telegram the news of a loved one's death. She could not break the gummed strip that secured the little blue paper without her fingers trembling and her soul quivering in agony, lest this message, which took so long to unfold, should reveal to her new tidings of disaster, fresh cause for tears. Annette, however, full of youthful curiosity, always welcomed the unknown. Her heart, to which life had but lately dealt its first blow, looked for nothing but joy from the black bag slung over the postman's shoulders, that grim black bag which distributes through city streets and country roads its burden of joy and sorrow.

The Countess was neglecting her luncheon. Her thoughts were hovering around the messenger, who was on his way to her with a few words of writing, words destined, perchance, to wound her like a knife plunged in her bosom. In her agony of suspense she could hardly breathe. She tried to foresee the nature of these urgent tidings. To whom could they relate? The thought of Oliver flashed into her mind. Could he be ill? Or dead perhaps,—he too?

The ten minutes of waiting seemed to her an eternity. She tore open the telegram, saw her husband's name at the end of the message and read as follows:

"Bertin leaving Paris for Roncières at one p.m. Please send carriage to meet him. Love."

"Well, Mamma?" asked Annette.

"Monsieur Bertin is coming to pay us a visit."

"How splendid. When?"

"Immediately."

"Arriving at four this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how kind of him!"

But the Countess had turned pale, for of late a new anxiety had been growing in her mind, and this unexpected visit of Oliver's seemed to her the greatest of calamities.

"You can go and meet him with the carriage," she said to her daughter.

"Oh, Mamma, aren't you coming too?"

"No, I shall wait for you here."

"Why? He will feel hurt."

"I am not feeling very well."

"But just now you were thinking of walking to Berville."

"Yes, but my luncheon has disagreed with me."

"You will be feeling better by that time."

"No. And I think I will go to my room. Let me know as soon as he arrives."

"Yes, Mamma."

After giving orders about the phaeton and about Oliver's arrival, the Countess retired to her own room and locked the door.

Hitherto her life had flowed smoothly enough; its one striking feature had been Oliver's love; its one care the preservation of that love. From that contest she had hitherto emerged victorious. Lulled by worldly triumphs, she had developed the instincts of an exacting society beauty, who regards all the pleasant things of life as her due. After making a brilliant match in which affection had counted for nothing, she had accepted love as a necessary complement to perfect happiness, making up her mind to a guilty liaison, impelled thereto chiefly by passion and, to some extent, by her reverence for the emotion itself, which she regarded as compensation for an unromantic, humdrum existence. Her heart had fortified and barricaded itself within this stronghold of bliss, which chance had offered her, with no other care save to defend it against the hazards of daily life. With a pretty woman's graciousness she had accepted every pleasure that presented itself. Not very venturesome,

nor obsessed by fresh desires and cravings for novelty, affectionate, clinging, and cautious, content with the present, temperamentally distrustful of the future, she had husbanded the gifts of Destiny with prudence and sagacity.

But gradually, though she dared not admit it even to herself, there had crept into her soul a vague sense of the flight of time and of the approach of age. It rankled in her mind like a slight but gnawing pain, which never ceased. Conscious that life was a declivity on which there was no halting, she wilfully closed her eyes as she slid, so that she might hold fast to her dreams, and shut out the dizzy sight of the abyss and the despairing horror of helplessness. She went her way smiling, taking a resolute pride in having preserved her beauty for so long.

When Annette appeared at her side in all the bloom of her eighteen years, she gloried in the thought that the subtle charms of her maturity might be preferred to the child's radiant youthfulness. She felt that she was entering upon a phase of tranquil happiness. And then the death of her mother struck her a blow right to the heart. For the first few days she was plunged in an agony of grief which banished every other thought from her mind. From morning till night she remained engulfed in her despair, endeavouring to recapture a thousand impressions of her dead mother, her familiar sayings, her appearance in bygone days, the gowns she used to wear. She was as if storing her mind with precious relics, retrieving from the vanished past all the tiny trifling memories with which to nourish her agonising reveries. At last she reached such a pitch of despair, that she became subject to continual nerve-storms and fainting fits, and finally all her pent-up anguish resolved itself in tears, which gushed from her eyes day and night.

One morning when her maid entered her room, to draw back the curtains and open the shutters, she said to her mistress:

"How are you to-day, Madam?"

"Not at all well," replied the Countess, who was feeling utterly exhausted with so much weeping.

Holding the tea-tray in her hands, the maid looked at her mistress and was touched at the sight of her colourless face against the white sheets.

"Really, Madam, you are looking very ill," she faltered, with genuine concern in her voice. "You should take more care of yourself."

The tone in which she spoke was like a tiny pin-prick in the Countess's heart, and as soon as the maid had left the room she sprang out of bed and examined her face in the long mirror of the wardrobe. She stood aghast at the sight of her own countenance, horrified at her hollow cheeks and red eyes, at the ravages that had been wrought by these few days of suffering. That face of hers, which she knew so well, which she had beheld in so many different mirrors, until every expression, every charm, every smile was familiar to her, that face she had so carefully tended, amending its pallor, obliterating the tiny marks of weariness, smoothing away from the corners of the eyes the faint lines which were visible in broad daylight, seemed to her suddenly the unknown countenance of some other woman wasted by a fell disease. In her anxiety to see more clearly and to convince herself of this unexpected calamity, she drew nearer and nearer to the mirror, until her forehead touched it and her breath clouded its surface, dimming and almost hiding her wan reflection.

With a handkerchief she wiped away the mist, and quivering with strange emotion, she made a long and patient investigation of the changes her face had undergone. With light touch she smoothed the skin on her cheeks and forehead, pushed back her hair, raised her eyelids to see the whites of her eyes, opened her mouth, examined her slightly discoloured teeth with here and there the glint of gold filling, and noted with distress her colourless gums and the sallowness of the skin on her cheeks and temples.

She was so engrossed in this scrutiny of her waning charms, that she did not hear the door open, and she gave a violent start when her maid came up behind her, and said:

"You have forgotten your tea, Madam."

Overwhelmed with confusion, the Countess turned round, while the maid remarked sympathetically:

"You have been crying too much, Madam. There is nothing like tears for ruining one's complexion. All the blood turns to water."

"Age has something to do with it too," replied the Countess sadly.

"Oh, no," protested the maid. "You need not worry about that yet, Madam. A few days' rest will put you right. But you ought to take some exercise and be very careful not to cry any more."

As soon as she was dressed, the Countess went into the park, and for the first time since her mother's death visited the little orchard where she used to amuse herself, tending and gathering flowers. Then she made her way to the river, and wandered along the banks till luncheon.

Seated at table opposite her husband, with her daughter at her side, she said tentatively:

"I am feeling better to-day. I think I'm less pale."

"Oh, you are still looking very ill," replied the Count.

Her heart sank, and from force of habit the tears came into her eyes. All that day and the days that followed, whether she thought of her mother or herself, she felt the sobs rising in her throat and the tears trembling on her eyelids, but to prevent them from flowing down and furrowing her cheeks, she repressed them; with a superhuman effort of the will she controlled her mind, forcing it to dwell on other subjects, and to forget her sorrows. Thus she endeavoured to comfort and distract herself, to banish gloomy thoughts, and so to win back the vanished bloom of health. She was determined not to return to Paris nor to meet Oliver Bertin, until she was herself again. Realising that she had grown too thin, and that at her age a certain plumpness was indispensable to comeliness, she endeavoured to restore her appetite with walks along the country lanes and through the woods, and although she returned home tired and not at all hungry she forced herself to eat as much as possible.

The Count, who was anxious to return to Paris, could not understand her persistent refusal to accompany him. At last, seeing her fixed in her determination, he announced his intention of going back by himself, leaving the Countess to follow when she felt disposed.

The next day she received his telegram informing her of Oliver's visit.

Such was her dread of Oliver's first glance, that she longed to run away and hide. If only their meeting could have been deferred for another fortnight or so! A single week of careful treatment can change a face entirely. For every woman, however young and healthy, is liable to be altered beyond recognition from one day to another by some trifling event. But the idea of confronting Oliver out in the open in the dazzling August sunshine, with rosy-cheeked Annette beside her, was so abhorrent to her that she at once resolved not to go to the station but to await him in the discreet twilight of the drawing-room.

She went up to her room to think. Occasional puffs of warm wind stirred the curtains. The air was alive with the chirping of crickets. She had never felt so utterly wretched. But this pain that she was now enduring was no longer the fierce and crushing anguish, which had broken her heart, which had racked and overwhelmed her, as she gazed upon the lifeless body of her darling old mother. In the space of a few days, that wound, which she had believed incurable, had dwindled to an aching memory, but she now felt herself submerged and carried away by a deep flood of melancholy, which had stealthily risen around her and from which there was no escape.

She wanted desperately to burst into tears, but she repressed them. As soon as she felt her eyelids wet, she hurriedly dried them, and rising from her chair, walked about the room, and looked out into the park, watching the rooks slowly wheeling above the tops of the lofty trees, their wings inky black against the blue sky. Then she paused in front of her mirror, glanced at herself critically, touched with her powder puff a tear-stain at the corner of one eye,

and looked at the clock, wondering what stage of his journey Oliver had reached. Like every woman distracted by some real or imaginary suffering of the soul, she clung to her lover with new and desperate passion. Was he not all the world to her, dearer than life itself, everything that one human being can be to a heart that knows no other love and feels itself growing old.

Suddenly she heard the crack of a whip in the distance. Running to the window she saw the carriage and pair rounding the lawn at a smart trot. Oliver, who was on the back seat beside Annette, caught sight of the Countess and fluttered his handkerchief, and she waved her hands to him in answering welcome. Then with beating heart she went downstairs, happy for the moment, quivering with joy, to think that he would be near her, that she could talk to him and gaze at him.

They met in the hall outside the drawing-room door.

Obeying an irresistible impulse, he folded her in his arms, and in a voice thrilling with genuine emotion he exclaimed:

"My poor dear friend, permit me to kiss you."

Closing her eyes, she leaned towards him, and resting on his bosom, raised her face to his. As he pressed his lips upon it, she murmured in his ear:

"Ah, how I love you!"

Still clasping her hands, Oliver gazed at her and said:

"Now let me see your poor face."

She felt ready to swoon, but he resumed:

"Yes, you are just a little pale, but that is nothing."

In her relief she could only falter:

"Ah, dear friend, dear friend!"

But he had turned away and was looking about him for Annette, who had vanished.

"Doesn't it seem strange," he said abruptly, "to see your daughter in mourning?"

"Why?" asked the Countess.

"Don't you know why?" he cried in curious excitement. "But she's exactly like that portrait I painted of you; your

own portrait. She is your exact double, just what you were that day I first saw you, in the Duchess's drawing-room. Don't you remember how you passed through that door under my gaze, like a frigate passing under the guns of a fort. Upon my soul, when I caught sight of that child just now on the station platform, all in black with her sunny hair waving about her face, my heart stood still, and I nearly burst into tears. I tell you it is enough to drive a man distracted, who has known you as I have known you, who has studied you more closely and loved you more dearly than anyone on earth, and painted you into the bargain. Why I really thought you had sent her all by herself to meet me on purpose to give me this surprise. By Jove, I was amazed! I tell you it's enough to drive a man distracted—Annette, Nané," he shouted.

Annette called back from the drive, where she was giving the horses sugar.

"I'm out here."

"I want you."

She came running in.

"Just stand here beside your mother."

She obeyed and he compared the two faces. But this time it was mechanically, and without conviction in his voice, that he repeated:

"Yes, it's amazing, amazing."

Now that they were standing side by side, the resemblance was less striking than it had been before they left Paris. Her black gown gave new value to the girl's youthful radiance, while her mother had long since lost the brilliancy of hair and complexion which had dazzled and bewitched the painter at their first meeting.

Oliver followed the Countess into the drawing-room. He was beaming all over.

"Wasn't it a splendid idea of mine to come down here?" he exclaimed. Then he corrected himself.

"No, it was really your husband's suggestion. He said I was to bring you back. But do you know what I propose? You can't guess? Well, I propose that we stay here

instead. In this heat, Paris is detestable, while the country is delicious. Heavens, how lovely it is!"

With the approach of evening, a cool breeze had sprung up, making the trees in the park quiver, and drawing from the ground light mists, which hung like a transparent veil over the horizon.

The three cows were standing with their heads down, greedily cropping the grass. With a loud whirring of wings, four peacocks flew up from the ground and perched on the branches of a cedar, where they always roosted, under the windows of the château. Dogs were barking in the distance, and borne on the quiet evening air, across the green country, came the sound of human voices, brief utterances shouted from field to field, and the short guttural cries with which the peasants herd their cattle.

Bare-headed, his eyes shining, Oliver drew deep breaths of rapture. The Countess looked at him.

"This is true happiness," he said.

"It never lasts," she answered, drawing close to his side.

"Let us seize it while we may."

She smiled.

"You never used to care for the country."

"It's because I find you here that I love it. Nowadays I could not exist anywhere without you. When one is young distance doesn't matter; love contents itself with letters, thoughts, airy raptures. Perhaps it is because one knows that life is still before one, and perhaps because what one feels is physical passion, rather than a yearning of the heart. But at my age, love becomes the one resource of the halt and maimed, the solace of a soul, fluttering on a single wing and less given to soaring away into the clouds. The heart knows no thrill of ecstasy and merely asserts its egoistical needs. The consciousness that I have no time to waste urges me to make the most of what remains."

"Oh, you're not old," she said, pressing his hand.

"Ah yes," he replied, "I am old. Look at all the proofs; my hair, the change in my character, this depression that attacks me. Why, good heavens, that's a thing I have never

known before—depression. If anyone had told me at thirty that some day I should feel wretched without the slightest cause, restless, disgusted with everything, I should never have believed him. It shows that my heart, too, has grown old."

"Oh," she exclaimed, with deep conviction, "my own heart is still young. It has not changed at all—except, perhaps, to grow younger. Once it was twenty. Now it is not more than sixteen."

For a long time they stayed talking at the open window, one with the spirit of evening, close to each other, closer than they had ever been, steeped like the earth in a tender twilight.

A servant entered and annouuced that dinner was ready.

"Have you told Mademoiselle Annette?"

"Mademoiselle Annette is in the dining-room."

The three of them sat down to table. The shutters were closed, and the light of the twelve candles in the two great candelabra fell on Annette's face and powdered her hair with gold.

Bertin could not take his eyes off her.

"By Jove, how charming she looks in black," he exclaimed with a smile. After admiring the daughter he turned to the mother as if to thank her for this pleasure that he owed to her.

When they returned to the drawing-room the moon had risen above the trees of the park, which were massed together in one great island of darkness, while the open country beyond was like a sea, hidden beneath a diaphanous mist that floated just above the level of the ground.

"Oh, Mamma, let's go out for a walk," cried Annette, "and we'll take Julio with us."

The Countess consented, and they set out. The girl darted on ahead, playing with the spaniel. As they skirted the lawn, they could hear the heavy breathing of the cows, who, startled out of their sleep and scenting their enemy, raised their heads to look. Slender rays of moonlight were filtering through the branches of the

trees beyond, splashing the leaves with light and forming upon the path pools of yellow radiance. Annette and Julio were racing each other, as if the perfect night inspired both with the same lightness of heart, the same rapture, expressed in their wild gambols. Through the glades, where the moonbeams were gathered into deep wells of light, the girl glided like a phantom, and Oliver called her back, entranced by that black-robed vision, with its radiant countenance. When she ran off again, he seized the Countess's hand and pressed it, and often, where the shadows were deeper, his lips sought hers, as if each glimpse of Annette had stirred his heart to new eagerness.

At last they reached the edge of the open country, where clumps of trees, marking the various farms, loomed vaguely in the distance. Through the milk-white mist in which the fields were steeped, the far horizon merged into infinity, and the ethereal silence, the breathing silence of that vast expanse, so warm and luminous, was pregnant with the unutterable hope, the ineffable expectancy which renders a summer night so exquisite.

High in the sky hung long slender trails of cloud, like silver fish-scales. By keeping very quiet, one could hear through the stillness of the night a vague continuous hum of life, a harmony composed of a thousand infinitesimal sounds, which seemed almost a form of silence. A quail in a meadow near them uttered its double note. Julio pricked up his ears and crept in the direction of the bird's flute-like call. Holding her breath, stooping down, and moving as softly as the spaniel, Annette stole after him.

"Ah!" sighed the Countess, alone with her lover, "why are moments like these so fugitive? There is nothing that we can grasp, nothing that we can keep. There is hardly time to taste the joys of life before they vanish."

Oliver smiled and kissed her hand.

"No metaphysics for me this evening. The present is enough."

"You do not love me as I love you," she whispered.

" How can you . . . ? " he began, but she interrupted him.

" No. As you put it so well before dinner just now, what you love in me is someone who satisfies the desires of your heart, someone who has never caused you a single pang, and who has brought a little happiness into your life. It is true. I know it, I feel it. I glow with the joy of realising that I have been a comfort to you, a help, a refuge. You have loved, and you still love, everything in me that ministers to your happiness, my little attentions, my admiration, my anxiety to please you, my passion, the utter surrender of my inmost self. But, don't you see, it is not my real self that you love. I am conscious of it, as one is conscious of an icy draught of air. You love me for a thousand qualities, my beauty, which is beginning to wane, my devotion, the wit that others attribute to me, the world's opinion of me, and my own opinion of yourself, which is locked in my heart. But all this is not myself, my real, absolute self. Do you see what I mean? "

" No, I'm afraid I don't. I am not conscious of having deserved these reproaches."

" Good heavens ! " she cried. " I only wanted to make you understand how much I love you. But I can't find the right words. When I think of you, and I am always thinking of you, my body and soul thrill with indescribable ecstasy at the knowledge that I am yours, and with irresistible yearning to give you ever more of myself. I long to sacrifice myself completely, for when one loves, there is nothing to equal the bliss of giving, giving unceasingly, all one has, one's life, one's mind, one's body—everything, and, realising that, to welcome every risk that enables one to give still more. I love you so much, that I even prize my sufferings on your account, my doubts, my torments, my pangs of jealousy, the agony I endure, when I feel your affection waning. I love in you someone, whom nobody else has ever discovered, a different Oliver from the one, whom all the world knows and admires, an Oliver, who is my own, who can never change or grow old, whom I cannot but love, since I look upon him with eyes that are blind to everyone else.

But these are things one cannot utter. There are no words to express them."

"Dear, dear Annie," he murmured softly, over and over again.

Julio came bounding back to them without having found the quail, which had ceased its call at his approach. Annette, breathless with running, followed close behind him.

"I am absolutely done," she exclaimed, "you must support me, Sir painter."

She took his free arm, and with Oliver in the middle, the three turned homeward in silence through the darkness of the trees. Oliver felt himself possessed by them, pervaded by a mysterious flow of femininity which their contact instilled into him. He did not attempt to see their faces. It was enough for him to feel them touching him, and he even shut his eyes to enjoy the sensation to the full.

Guided by them, he moved as in a dream. He was in love with both of them, with her on his left, as with her on his right, without knowing which was which; unable to tell mother from daughter. He frankly abandoned himself to this distracting experience, with a subtle sensuousness of which he was hardly conscious. He sought to mingle them in his heart, to blend them in his thoughts, lulling his passion in the charm of this fascinating confusion. Surely they were but one person, these two, mother and daughter, who were so like each other. It seemed as if the daughter had come to earth only to revive his old affection for her mother. When he opened his eyes on entering the château, he felt that he had spent the most exquisite moments of his whole existence, that he had experienced the strangest, the most baffling, the most complete emotions ever granted to a man, whom the seductions of two women had intoxicated with one and the same passion.

"Ah, what a divine evening," he exclaimed, when he found himself standing between them in the lamplight.

"I don't want any sleep," cried Annette, "I could wander about all night when it's fine."

But the Countess looked at the clock.

"Why, it's half past eleven. Time for bed, my child."

They said good-night and went off to their own rooms. But of the three, Annette, who had protested against going to bed, was the only one who soon fell asleep.

The next morning when the maid came in at the usual time with the early tea and opened the shutters and curtains, she glanced at her mistress, who was still half asleep.

"You are looking better to-day, Madam."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, certainly. Your face isn't so drawn."

Even before she consulted her mirror, the Countess knew that it was true. Her spirits were light, her heart was beating quietly, and she felt alive again. The blood in her veins was no longer racing feverishly as on the previous day, making her languid and restless, but was diffusing a pleasant glow and a feeling of confident happiness.

As soon as the maid had left the room, she went to examine herself in the glass. She was a little disappointed. She was feeling so well that she had expected to find herself looking several years younger after one night's rest. Then she realised the childishness of this hope and after a further scrutiny, she acknowledged ruefully that all that could be said was that her complexion was clearer, her eyes less tired, and her lips redder than the day before. But her mind was at peace; she refused to be depressed by this admission and smiled as she thought to herself:

"In a few days I shall be quite myself again. I have been through too much to pick up all at once."

But she lingered a long time, a very long time, at her dressing table, with its shining mirror of bevelled crystal and its attractive array of little toilet implements, bearing on their ivory handles her monogram, surmounted by a Countess's coronet. They lay in a row on the lace-bordered muslin toilet cover; a whole collection of dainty little tools, all different, all destined for some delicate and mysterious purpose; some of sharp, bright steel, curiously shaped, like surgical instruments for Lilliputian operations; others, soft and round, made of feathers, down, or the skin of some rare

animal, for applying to fair cheeks soothing powder, liquid perfume or scented face-cream. She spent a long time manipulating them deftly, bestowing now upon her lips, now upon her temples, touches lighter than kisses, restoring faded tints, darkening her eyes, accentuating her eyebrows. When at last she left her room she felt almost sure that his first impression of her would not be altogether unfavourable.

"Where is Monsieur Bertin?" she asked the footman, whom she met in the hall.

"Monsieur Bertin is in the orchard," the man replied, "playing tennis with Mademoiselle Annette."

From a distance she could hear Annette's clear voice and Oliver's masculine tones calling out the score:

"Fifteen. Thirty. Forty. Advantage. Deuce. Advantage. Game."

A plot of ground had been levelled for a tennis court in the orchard, which was a large square stretch of grass, planted with apple trees and bounded by the park, the kitchen garden and the farms belonging to the château. Along the banks, which enclosed it on three sides, like the defences of a fortified camp, were beds full of every kind of flower, rare and common; masses of roses, pinks, heliotrope, fuchsias, mignonette, which, as Oliver had said, made the air taste of honey. And sure enough, from the cone-shaped hives of straw ranged along the trellised wall of the kitchen garden, golden bees flew humming all over that flowery mead.

Right in the middle of the orchard some apple-trees had been cut down to clear a space for the tennis court, which was bisected by a tarred net.

On one side Annette, bare-headed, with shining eyes and rosy cheeks, her tucked-up black skirts revealing her ankles and a goodly portion of leg, as she sprang to volley a ball, was darting all over the court, while her opponent's steady and skilful play reduced her to a state of breathless exhaustion.

In a white peaked cap and white flannel trousers, which fitted tightly round his somewhat prominent waist,

Oliver coolly waited for the ball, judging it accurately, returning it with the unhurried ease, the grace, concentration and masterly dexterity, which he brought to every form of physical exercise.

Annette caught sight of her mother.

"Good-morning, Mamma. Just wait till we have finished our rally."

This momentary distraction was her undoing. Oliver sent her back a fast, low ball which hardly rose at all, and which she missed.

"Game," cried Bertin, while Annette, caught napping, reproached him for taking advantage of the interruption. Julio, who was trained to retrieve the balls, as if they were partridges lost in the undergrowth, rushed after the ball as it rolled away into the grass, seized it carefully in his mouth, and brought it back, wagging his tail.

Oliver turned to greet the Countess. But he was so anxious to go on playing, so deeply engrossed in the game, so much delighted with his own agility, that he spared only a brief and casual glance for that face on which such pains had been lavished for his sake.

"Do you mind if we go on, Countess?" he asked. "I am afraid of catching a chill and getting neuralgia."

"Yes, do," she replied and sat down on a heap of dry grass, scythed that morning to make room for the players. She watched them with a sudden feeling of depression.

Exasperated by continual defeat, Annette rushed wildly all over the court, uttering cries of triumph or despair, while her hair, loosened by her exertions, came down and tumbled about her shoulders. She tucked the racquet between her knees and with a few hasty gestures twisted it up again, thrusting the pins impatiently into the heavy coils.

Bertin called out to the Countess:

"Doesn't she look charming like that, as blooming as the day?"

Ah yes, she was young. She could run about and get as hot and untidy as she pleased. Nothing mattered. Whatever she did merely served to heighten her beauty.

They went on playing, while the Countess, feeling more and more dejected, thought to herself that Oliver preferred this childish game of pat-ball, no better than a kitten's chase after paper pellets, to the joy of sitting by her side, that sunny morning, in the consciousness of her love.

The first stroke of the luncheon bell brought her a sudden feeling of relief, as if a weight had been lifted from her heart. But as she took his arm and walked with him towards the house, he said:

"I have been enjoying myself like a schoolboy. How jolly it is to be young, or at least to feel young. There's nothing like it. When you give up running, your day is done."

After luncheon, the Countess, who on the previous day had for the first time neglected her usual visit to the cemetery, suggested that they should go there together. All three set out for the village. Their way led through a wood through which flowed a brook called La Rainette, tree-frog, doubtless after its population of small batrachia; then across a stretch of common, until they reached the Church, which was surrounded by a group of houses, occupied by the grocer, the baker, the butcher, the wine merchant, and other humble shop-keepers, patronised by the peasants. They walked in silent meditation, all of them oppressed by thoughts of the departed. For a long time the two women remained on their knees beside the grave and prayed, the Countess perfectly still with bowed head and her handkerchief to her eyes, for she was afraid to weep and let the tears run down her cheeks. Her prayers were no longer as hitherto, an invocation, a despairing appeal to her who lay beneath the marble tomb, until the increasing agony of her emotion convinced her that her dead mother heard her, but instead a passionate faltering of the Ave Maria, and the sacred words of the Lord's Prayer. To-day she felt that she had neither the strength nor the concentration essential to that torturing and one-sided communion with whatever emanation of the departed soul still lingers about the grave, where its mortal remains lie buried. Her woman's heart was now

in the grip of other emotions, disturbing, wounding and tormenting, and her passionate prayers to heaven were fraught with vague entreaties.

She invoked God, the inexorable Deity, who has cast upon the earth all these unhappy mortals, in the hope that He might take pity upon her, as upon the dead whom He had called home. She could not have explained what it was that she was asking of Him, for her apprehensions were still confused and elusive. She was only conscious of her need of divine aid, of supernatural protection against threatening dangers and unavoidable sorrows. Annette, kneeling with closed eyes, had finished murmuring her formal prayer, and now, unwilling to rise to her feet before her mother, had lost herself in thoughts.

Oliver Bertin watched them, thinking to himself what a charming picture they made, and half regretting that he could not venture to sketch them.

On the way home the conversation turned on human fate; touching lightly on those melancholy and poetic thoughts that spring from a sentimental and passionate philosophy, the common talk of men and women, to whom life has dealt some wound, and whose hearts draw together as they mingle their sorrows.

Annette, who was too young for such ideas, kept breaking away from her companions to gather flowers by the wayside. Seized with a desire to have her near him, and provoked by her sudden flights, Oliver could not keep his eyes off her. He was piqued because she seemed to take more interest in the colour of a flower than in his own observations. He was conscious of a curious feeling of chagrin, because he could not fascinate and dominate her as he did her mother; he longed to put out his hand, catch her and hold her fast, and forbid her to run off again. He felt that she was too lively, too young, too careless, too free,—free as a bird, or as a puppy who will not obey and come to heel but still has the spirit of independence in his blood, that happy instinct of liberty not yet curbed by whip and voice.

To attract her attention he began to talk of more cheerful subjects. Now and then he would ask her some question, endeavouring to rouse her interest and her feminine curiosity. But the fitful breezes of heaven seemed to be blowing through Annette's head that day, as over the waving cornfields, scattering her thoughts to the four quarters of the sky. Scarcely had she interrupted her gambols to interject, with an absent glance, a perfunctory answer, when she was off again to her flowers. At last he grew exasperated, stung to childish impatience by her indifference. When she came back to her mother, asking her to hold one bunch of flowers while she picked another, he caught her by the elbow and held her fast, so that she could not run away again. Laughingly she struggled and tried with all her might to free herself. At this his masculine instinct prompted him to adopt the tactics of the weak. As he could not capture her attention by his conversation, he would bribe her by an appeal to her vanity.

"Tell me, which is your favourite flower," he said, "I will have it made into a brooch for you."

"A brooch?" she echoed in surprise.

"Yes, it shall be set with stones of the same colour as your flower; rubies if it's a poppy, sapphires if it's a cornflower, with a little leaf of emeralds."

Annette's face lit up with that expression of rapture and affection with which every woman welcomes promises and presents.

"Cornflowers are very sweet," she said.

"Very well, a cornflower it shall be. We will order it as soon as we get back to Paris."

This time she did not run off again. The idea of the brooch, which she was already trying to picture, kept her by his side.

"Will it take a long time to make?" she asked.

He smiled to see that she had fallen into the trap.

"I don't know. It depends how difficult it is. But we will make the jeweller hurry up."

A poignant thought suddenly occurred to her.

"But I shall not be able to wear it as I'm in deep mourning."

He had linked his arm in hers, and drawing her close to him, he replied:

"Never mind, you can keep it till you are out of mourning. It won't prevent you from looking at it."

As on the previous evening, he was walking between them, like a prisoner, with their shoulders touching him on either side. For the pleasure of seeing them raise to his the same blue eyes, with the flecks of black in their depths, he kept talking first to one, then to the other, and glancing at each in turn. In the strong sunshine he was less disposed to confuse the Countess with Annette, but he identified the daughter more and more with his reviving memories of her mother as she used to be. He longed to kiss them both, the one for the sake of finding again upon her cheek and neck something of that rosy bloom which had once enchanted him; the other because he had never ceased to love her, nor to respond to the appeal which old custom had made so strong. At that moment he realised that his affection for her, his passion, which had long since lost its first ardour, was revived by the sight of this reincarnation of her youth.

Annette returned to her flowers, and this time Oliver did not call her back. The touch of her arm, his satisfaction at her delight over his promised gift, seemed to have soothed him, but he still followed all her movements with the pleasure with which we contemplate some being, or object, whose beauty captivates and enraptures. When she returned with her sheaf of flowers, he drew a deep breath, seeking instinctively some savour of herself, some fragrance of her breath, of her warm young body, perfuming the air through which she had passed.

He looked at her with the ecstasy with which one gazes at the dawn, or listens to music, quivering with delight at her every attitude, whether she bent down, stood erect, or raised both arms above her head to arrange her hair. With every passing hour she quickened in him the illusion of the past. There was something in her pretty ways, her gestures,

which brought back to his lips the sweetness of vanished kisses. The distant past, of which he had lost all sense, was being transmuted by her into something which was almost a present dream. She confused the periods, dates, and epochs in the history of his heart; she rekindled extinct emotions, and without his realizing it, blended yesterday with to-morrow, memory with hope.

He ransacked his memory, trying to recall whether the Countess, even in the height of her bloom, had possessed this same supple and fawnlike grace, this same dashing, capricious, irresistible fascination, the grace of a young animal, leaping and bounding. No. She had been more mature, less natural. A town-bred birl, she had grown into a town-bred woman, without ever having tasted the open air of the country or played among the meadows. Her beauty had developed in the shadow of city walls, and not in the sunshine of heaven.

When they reached home, the Countess sat down to write letters at her little table which stood in the recess of a window. Annette went up to her room, while Oliver lighted a cigar and set out for a stroll in the park, pacing the winding paths with his hands behind his back. But he never went far enough to lose sight of the white façade and the pointed roof of the château. If it disappeared for a moment behind a clump of trees or shrubs, he felt a sudden shadow steal across his heart, like a cloud veiling the sun, and as soon as it was visible again through a gap in the branches, he paused for a moment to contemplate its two tiers of lofty windows. Then he resumed his walk.

He felt excited and pleased. But what was it that delighted him? Why, everything. The air seemed to him singularly pure, that day, and life a pleasant thing. His limbs felt as light as if he were a little boy again; he wanted to run, to catch the yellow butterflies that danced above the lawn as if suspended by elastic strings. He hummed airs from the Operas. More than once he murmured to himself that famous phrase of Gounod's, "Let me behold thy face," and discovered in it new depths of tenderness. Presently he

began to wonder how it was that he suddenly felt such an entirely different person. Yesterday in Paris he had been disgusted with life, fretful and depressed; to-day he was serene, and charmed with everything; it was as if some kindly god had given him a change of soul.

"The good fellow might as well have changed my body at the same time," he thought, "and made me a little younger."

At that moment he caught sight of Julio, who was hunting in the undergrowth. He called him, and when the spaniel came up to him and thrust his beautiful head with its long silken ears into his hand, he sat down on the grass to fondle him; he took him on his lap, stroked him and kissed him with all the emotion of an impressionable woman.

After dinner, instead of going for another walk, they spent a quiet domestic evening in the drawing-room.

Suddenly the Countess remarked:

"We shall really have to go back to Paris soon."

"Oh don't talk of that yet," cried Oliver. "Until I arrived nothing would induce you to leave Roncières, but now that I am here, your one idea is to get away."

"But, dear friend," she replied, "we cannot possibly stay here indefinitely, we three."

"It's only a question of a few days, not of remaining indefinitely. How often have I stayed with you for weeks on end?"

"Yes, but the circumstances were different. We were keeping open house then."

"Oh Mamma," cried Annette coaxingly, "Just a few more days—just two or three. Monsieur Bertin is so good at teaching me to play tennis. I hate being beaten, but afterwards I am so glad to think that I am getting on a little."

That very morning the Countess had been planning to prolong her friend's unexpected visit till Sunday; but now she was anxious to leave Roncières, she hardly knew why. That day, to which she had looked forward so confidently, had pervaded her soul with indescribable melancholy,

unreasoning apprehensions, as haunting and vague as a presentiment.

Alone in her room, she sought to trace this new access of depression to its source. Had she suffered one of those infinitesimal vexations, so momentary that they leave no impression upon the mind, although the exquisitely sensitive strings of the heart continue to vibrate? It might be so, but what could have caused it? She could remember certain unavowed grievances, in the thousand varying phases of her mood, which was never the same from one minute to another. But really they were too trivial to account for her dejection.

"I am too exacting," she concluded. "I have no business to torture myself like this."

She threw open her window to breathe in the night air, and leaning her elbows on the sill, she remained there gazing at the moon.

A soft sound made her look down, and she saw Oliver walking up and down in front of the house.

"Why did he say he was going to his room?" she complained to herself. "Why didn't he tell me he was going out again and ask me to come with him? He must have known how happy it would have made me. I wonder what he is thinking about."

The thought that he had not desired her companionship, that he had preferred to wander all by himself that lovely night, smoking a cigar, which she could see glowing in the darkness—all by himself, when he could have thrilled her with joy by asking her to join him; that he had no continual need of her, no constant yearning for her presence, convulsed her soul with renewed bitterness. Just as she was closing her window to shut out the sight of him and the temptation of calling to him, he looked up and saw her.

"Well, Countess, dreaming in the starlight?"

"Yes, and so are you, it seems."

"Oh, I'm only smoking."

She could not resist the impulse to say to him:

"Why didn't you tell me you were going out?"

"I only wanted to smoke a cigar. I am coming in now."

"Then good-night, dear friend."

"Good-night, Countess."

She retreated into her room, flung herself into a low armchair, and burst into tears. When she rang for her maid to undress her, the woman noticed her mistress's red eyelids, and said sympathetically:

"Oh madam, you won't be looking your best to-morrow."

The Countess slept badly; she was feverish and haunted by nightmares. As soon as she awoke, before ringing for her maid, she opened her windows, drew back the curtains, and went to look at her face in the mirror. Her features were drawn, her eyelids swollen, and her complexion sallow. Her distress was so violent that she longed to say that she was ill and to hide herself in bed till the evening.

Then she was suddenly seized with an irresistible desire to leave Roncières at once, by the first possible train, to flee from these sunlit regions, where the broad daylight of the open country revealed so clearly the indelible marks of sorrow and experience. In Paris one spends one's time in twilight rooms, heavily curtained, which even at high noon admit no more than a soft radiance. In Paris she would be her lovely self again, with the pallor appropriate to that discreet illumination. Before her eyes flashed Annette's face, all fresh and rosy, her hair a little ruffled, as when she played tennis. All at once she understood the vague uneasiness which oppressed her. It was not that she was jealous of her daughter's beauty; far from it. But she realised, she admitted to herself for the first time, that she must never again appear beside her in bright sunshine.

She rang the bell, and without waiting to drink her tea, with a feverish and growing impatience, she made arrangements for her departure, wrote out telegrams, even ordered dinner for that evening, settled her housekeeping accounts at the château, and issued her final instructions, all within an hour.

When she came downstairs, Annette and Oliver, who had been informed of her decision, overwhelmed her with

questions. Then, seeing that she gave no definite reason for this sudden departure, they grumbled a little and showed their disgust, until the very moment when they parted outside the station in Paris.

"Will you come to dinner to-morrow?" said the Countess as she gave Oliver her hand.

"Yes, I'll come," he replied rather sulkily. "But all the same it wasn't nice of you to do this. We were so happy together down there, the three of us."

III

As soon as the Countess was alone with her daughter, driving home in her brougham, she was conscious of a sudden feeling of peace and relief, as if she had passed through some serious crisis. She breathed more freely; she smiled at all the houses they passed, welcoming each familiar feature of this city, whose every detail seems imprinted upon the eyes and hearts of its children. Each shop she noticed served to remind her of all the other shops along the Boulevard, and conjured up the faces of their owners, whom she had so often caught sight of behind their windows.

She felt that she was delivered—but from what danger? reassured—but on what account? confident—but for what reason?

When the brougham drew up in the vaulted carriage entrance, she stepped out lightly, and plunged like a fugitive into the gloom of the staircase; thence into the gloom of her drawing-room, and at last into the gloom of her own room. There she remained standing for some moments, glad to be home again, safe in that dim blurred daylight of Paris, that soft radiance, which hints rather than reveals, and suffers a woman to use her own discretion in display or concealment. A subconscious recollection of that dazzling brightness which flooded the country, still haunted her mind like the ache of an old wound.

When she went downstairs her husband, who had just come in, kissed her affectionately.

"Ah!" he said smiling. "I was quite sure our friend Bertin would bring you back. It was a good idea of mine sending him down to you."

"Oh, it was hard work," remarked Annette demurely, in the special tone she used for quiet sarcasm. "She couldn't make up her mind."

Somewhat disconcerted, the Countess made no reply.

She was not at home to visitors that evening. Most of the next day Madame de Guilleroy spent at different shops, choosing and ordering whatever she required. When hardly more than a child, she had already begun to delight in the long hours spent before the mirror in the fitting rooms of famous dressmakers. As soon as she crossed the threshold, her spirits rose, as she thought of all the details of those meticulous rehearsals, that are held behind the scenes of Paris society. She loved the rustle of skirts, as the assistants hastened to receive her, delighted in their smiles, their suggestions, their questions, and she treated the head of the establishment, dressmaker, corset maker, or milliner, as a person of importance, an artist to whose opinion she deferred. She particularly enjoyed the deft ministrations of the young women, who robed and unrobed her, and turned her slowly about in front of her own charming reflection. The thrill she experienced at the touch of their light fingers on her arms, her hair, her neck, was among the most voluptuous of all the minor delights of her luxurious existence.

On that particular day, however, she felt a qualm as she presented herself without her hat and veil before those faithful mirrors. But her first visit to the milliner reassured her. She could not but admit that the three hats she chose suited her to perfection, and when the milliner said to her in a voice of deep conviction: "Oh, Madam, ladies with fair complexions ought always to wear mourning!" she went away perfectly happy, and, completely restored to confidence, she visited the other shops.

On her return home she found a note from the Duchess, who had been to call on her, and was coming again that evening. She wrote some letters, and then sat musing awhile, wondering that a mere change of scene could relegate to a past that seemed already remote, the grievous loss that

had so utterly overwhelmed her. She could hardly believe that she had only left Roncières the previous day, so complete a transformation had been wrought within her by her return to Paris. It was as if this little journey had healed her wounds.

Just before dinner, Oliver arrived.

"You look dazzling this evening," he exclaimed as soon as he saw her.

At his praise a warm wave of happiness swept over her.

After dinner the Count, who was very fond of billiards, challenged Oliver to a game, and the two ladies accompanied them to the billiard room, where coffee was served. The men were still playing when the Duchess was announced, and they all returned to the drawing-room. Immediately afterwards, the Corbelles arrived. They spoke in lachrymose voices, and for some minutes it seemed from the lugubrious tone of the conversation as if the whole party were about to dissolve in tears. But gradually the sympathetic enquiries yielded to a new trend of thought, their voices lost their plaintive inflections, and everyone began to talk naturally, as if the shadow of the Countess's loss, which a moment ago had plunged them all in gloom, had suddenly vanished.

Oliver rose from his chair, took Annette by the hand and made her stand under her mother's portrait with the light of the reflecting lamp full upon her.

"Isn't it amazing?" he said.

The Duchess was almost beside herself with astonishment.

"Good heavens! Am I dreaming? Why it's a reincarnation. And to think it didn't strike me the minute I came in. Oh my little Annie, I see you again. How well I remember you, the first time you went into mourning after your marriage, or rather the second time, as you had already lost your father. Annette, in that black gown, is her mother all over again. It's a miracle. Without the portrait one would never have noticed it. Your daughter is certainly very much like your real self, but she is far more like this picture of you."

Musadieu, who had heard of the Countess's return and was anxious to be one of the first to offer her his respectful sympathy, was announced. He broke off in the midst of a phrase of condolence at the sight of the girl standing by the portrait with the same light reflected upon her, and looking like its living sister.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "that's one of the most extraordinary things I have ever seen."

The Corbelles, who always adopted the accepted opinions of others, now expressed their wonder, but in more measured terms.

The Countess had a gradually increasing feeling of oppression about the heart, as if all these exclamations of surprise were compressing and hurting it. Silently she gazed at her daughter standing beside the portrait, and a sense of nervous irritation crept over her. She could hardly restrain herself from exclaiming:

"Oh, do be quiet! As if I didn't know that she was like me!"

For the remainder of the evening she felt depressed, and the confidence so recently restored deserted her again.

Bertin was talking to her, when the Marquis de Farandal was announced. As soon as Oliver saw him coming towards his hostess, he rose and slipped away behind his armchair.

"Oh Lord, here's that ninny again," he muttered as he beat a strategic retreat.

After the Countess had welcomed the new arrival, she looked round for Oliver, to resume their interesting conversation. As she did not see him, she asked:

"Has the great man gone?"

"I rather think so, my dear," replied her husband, "I caught him in the act of taking French leave just now."

She was surprised, but after a moment's thought, she began to talk to the Marquis.

Her friends tactfully withdrew at an early hour; owing to her recent loss, she could only receive them in the quietest way.

As soon as she was in bed, she was attacked again by all the torments she had endured in the country. But now they assumed a more definite form; their significance was clear to her. She felt that she had grown old. That evening she had realised for the first time that in her own drawing-room, where she had hitherto monopolised admiration, compliments, praises and affection, she had been supplanted by another . . . by her own daughter. The consciousness suddenly flashed upon her that the homage, once her due, was now transferred to Annette. In the realm of her own house, a pretty woman's domain, where none may challenge her supremacy, whence she eliminates with tact and firmness every formidable rival, admitting her equals only for the sake of eclipsing them, she now recognised that her daughter would usurp her place.

How strange a pang her heart had endured, when all eyes were turned to Annette as she stood beside the portrait, with her hand in Oliver's! Suddenly she had felt herself ousted, dispossessed, dethroned. Everyone was gazing at Annette; not a soul had spared her a single glance. She was so much accustomed to the compliments and flattery she received whenever her protrait was admired; so sure of her meed of pretty speeches, which, though she scarcely regarded them, yet ministered to her vanity, that this desertion, this unexpected defection, this sudden transference of admiration from herself to her daughter, disturbed, astonished and dismayed her more than any other conceivable form of rivalry.

She possessed, however, an elasticity of character, which enabled her in every crisis, after her first prostration, to react, to make an effort, and to look on the bright side of things. So she told herself, that when once her precious child was married and no longer living under the same roof, she would be spared this incessant comparison, which in the presence of Oliver was beginning to become unendurable. But the shock had been too severe. She was feverish and hardly slept at all.

The next morning she woke up so weary and jaded that

she was seized with an irresistible yearning for comfort and help, a longing to turn to someone who could cure her of all her sufferings, mental and physical. She was really feeling so weak and ill that she made up her mind to consult her medical adviser. Perhaps she was on the verge of a serious illness; these alternations of despair and relief every few hours could not be natural. So she telegraphed for the doctor, who arrived about eleven o'clock. He was one of those solemn Society doctors, whose degrees and decorations bear witness to their ability, whose worldly wisdom is at least on a par with their professional knowledge, and whose tactful words are even more effective than their remedies in curing their fair patients.

He entered the room, shook hands with the Countess, and looked at her with a smile.

"It can't be very serious," he said. "No one with eyes like yours could possibly be really ill."

She felt grateful to him for this opening speech and proceeded to confide to him her sensations of weakness, exhaustion, depression, then, without laying stress upon it, her disquieting loss of looks. After listening to her attentively, but without asking a single question, except with reference to her appetite, as if he knew all about this mysterious feminine complaint of hers, he sounded her, examined her, touched her shoulder with the tip of his finger, felt the weight of her arm. Doubtless he could penetrate her thoughts; with the adept insight, which enabled him to pierce every veil, he had recognised that it was about her beauty, far more than about her health, that she wished to consult him.

"Yes," he said presently, "we are suffering from anaemia and nervous debility. No wonder, after the loss you have sustained! I am going to write you a little prescription which will put you right. But you must be sure to take plenty of strengthening food, especially meat essence, and drink beer instead of water. I will tell you a very good brand. Don't sit up late and get tired out, but take as much exercise as possible. Sleep a great deal and put on a little

weight. That is all the advice I have to give you, my fair patient."

She listened to him with ardent interest, trying to grasp everything his words implied. She took up his last remark:

"Yes, I have certainly lost weight. At one time I was rather too stout, and I may have pulled myself down by dieting."

"Undoubtedly. There is no harm in remaining thin if you have always been thin, but when you try to reduce yourself, you always suffer from it in some way. Happily that is soon mended. Good-bye, Countess."

Already she felt better and more cheerful. She sent to the principal retailer for some bottles of the beer the doctor recommended, so that it should be as fresh as possible. Just as she had finished luncheon, Bertin was announced.

"Here I am again," he said. "There is no getting rid of me. I have come to ask a favour. Are you engaged this afternoon?"

"No. Why?"

"And Annette?"

"No."

"Then can you both come to the studio at four o'clock?"

"Yes, but what for?"

"I am sketching in the face of my '*Reverie*,' which I told you about, when I asked you if your daughter would pose for me for a few moments. If I could have her just for an hour to-day it would be the greatest help. What do you say?"

The Countess felt an annoyance which she could not explain, and she hesitated before replying.

"Very well, dear friend," she said at last, "we will be with you by four o'clock."

"Thank you. You are kindness itself."

He went away to prepare his canvas and to develop his conception in advance, so as not to overtire his model.

The Countess set out alone, on foot, to finish her shopping. She went as far as the principal streets, but she felt as if she had no strength in her limbs and came slowly back

along the Boulevard Malesherbes. As she passed St. Augustin's, she yielded to an impulse to enter and rest, and pushed open the padded door. With a sigh of relief she breathed in the cool air in the great nave and relapsed into a chair.

Like many Parisiennes, she was pious. She had a firm belief in God, and could not conceive the universe existing without a Creator. Just as everyone else, she derived her ideas of the divine attributes from the material world around her. She vaguely identified the Eternal with what she knew of His works, but had, for all that, no very clear conception of the true nature of that mysterious Craftsman. She believed in Him firmly, adored Him theoretically, and feared Him very vaguely, for she was frankly ignorant of His intentions and wishes, and reposed but little confidence in the priests, whom she regarded as men of humble birth with a distaste for military service. Her father, a middle-class Parisian, had inculcated in her no religious principles whatever, and until her marriage she had not taken her religious duties seriously. Her new position had imposed upon her stricter outward conformity with the claims of the Church and she had dutifully accepted its mild yoke. She was patroness of a number of *crêches*, and was always in evidence at the one o'clock mass on Sunday. She saw personally to her private charities and contributed to public charities through the medium of an Abbé, who was the vicar of the parish.

She had often prayed from a sense of duty, as a soldier mounts guard outside his general's door. Sometimes she had prayed because she was unhappy, particularly when she had had reason to suspect Oliver of infidelity. On these occasions, without confiding to heaven the true inwardness of her supplications, and treating God with the same ingenuous hypocrisy as she would a husband, she had begged Him to protect her. Years ago, after her father's death, and after the recent death of her mother, she had been seized with violent paroxysms of devotion, invoking in passionate appeal Him who guards and comforts us.

In this church, to which chance had guided her steps, she suddenly felt a deep impulse to pray, not for any special object or on behalf of any other person, but solely for herself, as she had already done that day by her mother's tomb. Help from some quarter she must have, and she now appealed to God, just as she had appealed to her doctor that very morning. For a long time she remained on her knees. The silence of the church was broken now and then by the sound of footsteps. Suddenly, as if she heard a clock strike within her brain, she started out of her meditations, glanced at her watch and saw to her horror that it was nearly four o'clock. She hastened away to call for her daughter, whom Oliver was doubtless already awaiting.

The two ladies found the artist in his studio, contemplating his sketch of his "*Reverie.*" His idea was to reproduce exactly the impression he had received, while he was walking with Annette in the Parc Monceau : that of a plainly dressed young woman, dreaming, with an open book upon her knees. He had debated for a long time whether to give her a pretty face or a plain one. A plain face might have more character, prove more suggestive and touching, more significant, while a pretty face would be more pleasing and seductive. His desire to do a study of his little friend turned the scale. His dreaming maiden should be pretty, and all the more likely on that account to realise her romantic visions, which a plain girl would be doomed to nurse forever without hope.

As soon as the ladies entered the studio, Oliver said, rubbing his hands together :

" Well, Mademoiselle Nané, so we are to work together."

The Countess looked anxious. She sank into an armchair and watched Oliver placing an iron garden seat in the proper light. Then he went to his bookcase to select a volume. After some hesitation he asked :

" What sort of books does your daughter like? "

" Oh, anything. Give her a volume of Victor Hugo."

" *The Legend of the Centuries?* "

" Yes, certainly."

He turned to Annette.

"Sit down here, my child, and take this collection of poems and open it at page . . . at page 326, where you will find a poem called '*Poor People.*' Take it in slowly, word by word, as if you were sipping a wonderful wine, until it intoxicates you and touches you. Listen to the whisper of your heart. Then close the book, raise your eyes, and think and dream. In the meanwhile I will get my tools ready."

He withdrew to a corner of the room and began to prepare his palette. But as he squeezed on to the smooth surface the colours, which oozed from the leaden tubes like slender, writhing snakes, he turned from time to time to glance at the girl, deep in her book. His heart contracted, his hands trembled; he hardly knew what he was doing, and kept confusing the shades as he mixed his little dabs of paint. He was seized again by an overwhelming access of emotion as he gazed upon the apparition, this ghost of the past presenting itself to him in that same place, after a lapse of twelve years.

Annette had finished the poem and was gazing straight in front of her. As he approached her, he saw two crystal drops glisten in her eyes and roll down her cheeks. He was shaken to the soul with one of those transports of rapture that put a man beside himself. Turning to the Countess, he murmured:

"Good God, how lovely she is!"

But he was horrified at the sight of Madame de Guilleroy's convulsed and livid face. Her great eyes, wide with terror, were fixed upon the pair, her lover and her daughter. Oliver went up to her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, anxiously.

"I must speak to you."

Rising from her chair, she said hastily to Annette:

"Wait a minute, my child. I have something to say to Monsieur Bertin."

Swiftly she passed into the little drawing-room next door, which was used as a reception room for visitors. Utterly mystified, with his head in a whirl, he followed her. As soon as they were alone she caught his hands in hers.

"Oliver! Oliver!" she faltered. "Don't let her sit for you, I implore you."

"But why not?" he asked in dismay.

"Why not? Why not?" she echoed vehemently. "How can you ask? Don't you know why? Can't you see? Oh, I ought to have guessed it sooner, but it has only flashed upon me this very moment. . . . I can tell you nothing now . . . nothing. Please call Annette. Tell her that I am feeling ill and send for a cab. Come to ask after me in an hour's time. I shall be at home to no one but you."

"But won't you tell me what is the matter?"

She seemed on the verge of violent hysteria.

"No, let me alone. I will not tell you here. Call the child and send for a cab."

He had to obey and returned to the studio. Wholly unsuspecting, Annette had resumed her reading. Her heart was brimming over with the sadness of that tragic poem.

"Your mother is not feeling well," he said. "She nearly collapsed when she got into the little drawing-room. Go to her while I fetch some ether."

He went to his bedroom for the bottle and when he returned he found the pair of them weeping in each other's arms.

Annette was indulging the emotions aroused by the poem, while the Countess sought relief by mingling her anguish with that gentle sorrow, and her tears with those of her child.

Indescribably depressed, he stood and looked at them in silence for a time.

"Well," he said at last, "are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you, a little," replied the Countess. "It will pass off. You have sent for a cab?"

"Yes, it will be here immediately."

"Thank you, dear friend. It's nothing. But I have gone through so much lately."

A servant came to say that the cab had arrived.

Secretly in an agony, Oliver gave his arm to his friend,

who still looked pale and faint, and saw her into the cab. He could feel her heart beating beneath her gown.

As soon as he was alone, he exclaimed:

"But what on earth was the matter with her? Why this extraordinary attack?"

He began to think the matter out and was continually hovering around the truth, but lacked the courage to face it. At last, however, he came to the point.

"I wonder," he muttered to himself. "Can she possibly believe that I am paying court to her daughter? No, that would be too much."

Refuting, with all the arguments his sense of honour and his ingenuity could suggest, the suspicion with which he credited her, he was shocked to think that she could discern in his pure, his almost paternal, affection for her daughter, the slightest hint of gallantry. He grew more and more indignant with the Countess, outraged at her daring to suspect him of such baseness, such indescribable vileness, and he promised himself that presently, when he answered her accusation, he would express his disgust in no measured terms.

Soon afterwards, impatient for an explanation, he left the house to keep his appointment. On his way, in ever increasing resentment, he thought out arguments and phrases which should clear him and punish her for harbouring such a suspicion.

He found her lying on a couch, her face drawn with suffering.

"Well, my dear friend," he said drily, "will you kindly explain that extraordinary scene just now?"

"What?" she exclaimed in broken tones. "Do you still not understand?"

"No, I confess I don't."

"Oliver, look well into your heart."

"My heart?"

"Yes, into the depths of your heart."

"I don't understand. Speak plainly."

"Look deep into your heart and see if there is no peril lurking there and threatening you and me."

"Again I tell you that I don't understand. I gather that you have got some notion or other into your head, but my conscience is perfectly clear."

"I am not speaking of your conscience. I am speaking of your heart."

"Please be more explicit. I am no good at riddles."

Slowly stretching out her hands, she took those of her friend, and held them in hers. Then, as if each word were a separate pang:

"Beware, my friend. You are falling in love with my daughter."

Abruptly he drew away from her grasp, and with all the violence, the vehement gestures, the rising excitement of an innocent man repelling a shameful accusation, he defended himself and upbraided her for thus suspecting him.

She heard him out, but remained obstinately incredulous and convinced of the truth of her words.

"It's not that I suspect you, dear friend," she replied at last. "You are as little aware of what has befallen you, as I was myself this morning. You treat me as if I had accused you of wishing to seduce Annette. You misunderstand me. I know how honourable you are, how entirely worthy of all trust and esteem. I do but beg and entreat you to look into the depths of your heart and see whether your affection for my child, which is ripening there in spite of yourself, has not a somewhat different character from that of simple friendship."

Hurt by her words, and more and more disturbed, he again pleaded his loyalty, as he had done for his own benefit on his way to her house.

She listened till he had exhausted all his arguments. Then without anger, but with unshaken conviction, her face terribly pale, she replied:

"Oliver, I am aware of everything you have said, and I believe every word of it, as firmly as you do yourself. But I know that I am not mistaken. Listen; think it over; and

face the truth. My daughter is too like me, too entirely all that I was in the days when you first loved me, for you to help falling in love with her as you did with me."

"What!" he cried. "You dare to fling in my face such an accusation, because of a mere supposition, a logical absurdity: He loves me, my daughter is like me—and therefore he is bound to fall in love with her."

He relented at the increasing distress on the Countess's face, and continued in gentler tones:

"Why, my dear Annie, it is just because I find you again in the child, that she charms me. When I look at her, it is you yourself, and yourself only, that I love."

"Yes, and that is the very reason why I am beginning to suffer such agonies of terror. You have not yet analysed your emotions. But very soon you will be undeceived."

"Annie, I really think you must have taken leave of your senses."

"Shall I give you proofs?"

"Please do."

"In spite of my entreaties you had not been down to Roncières for three years. But you lost no time in coming when it was suggested that you should bring us back to Paris."

"Good heavens! Do you reproach me for not leaving you alone there, after your mother's death, when I knew that you were ill?"

"Very well, I do not insist. But there is another thing. Your longing to see Annette is so imperative that you could not let even a day go past without begging me to bring her to your studio, on the pretext of making her pose for you."

"It doesn't occur to you that it may have been yourself I wanted to see?"

"You are arguing against your own convictions; you are trying to persuade yourself, but you do not deceive me. Listen again. Why did you go away so abruptly the evening before last, as soon as the Marquis de Farandal came in? Do you know why?"

Intensely surprised and disturbed, his guard beaten down, he hesitated before replying. Then he said slowly:

"Why . . . I hardly know . . . I was tired, and to tell you the truth, the fool gets on my nerves."

"Since when?"

"He has always done so."

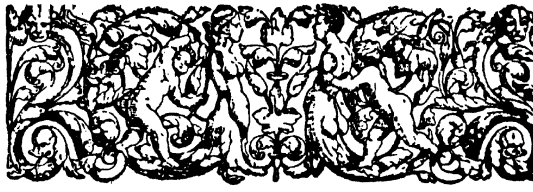
"I beg your pardon, I have often heard you sing his praises. You used to like him. Be perfectly frank, Oliver."

He thought for a few moments. Then, deliberately choosing his words, he replied:

"Well, possibly my deep love for you makes me care sufficiently for those dear to you, to affect my opinion of that idiot Farandal. I don't mind meeting him now and then, but I should be sorry to see him nearly every day at your house."

"My daughter's house will not be my house. But enough of this. I know your honest heart. I am sure you will think deeply about what I have said to you. When you have thought it over, you will realise that I have warned you of a terrible danger in time for you to avoid it. And you will be careful. Now let us talk of something else, shall we?"

He did not pursue the subject. His mind was thoroughly uneasy; he hardly knew what to make of it all and wanted to be alone to think it out. After a few minutes' casual conversation he left the house.



IV

OLIVER turned slowly homeward, as disturbed as if some shameful family secret had been revealed to him. He sought to sound the depths of his own heart, to see clearly into his own mind, to scan the private pages of that volume we carry within us, whose leaves seem sometimes stuck together and only to be separated and turned by the hand of a stranger. He certainly did not believe that he was in love with Annette. The Countess, whose jealous vigilance was always on the alert, had apprehended the danger from afar and had proclaimed it before it existed. But might it really come into being, this peril, to-morrow, or the next day, or in a month's time? He put the question frankly and in all sincerity tried to answer it.

That the child roused his instincts of tenderness, he admitted, but then these instincts so abounded in every man that one had to distinguish between the innocent and the harmful. For instance, he had a passion for animals, especially cats; he could never see their silken coats without feeling an irresistible and sensuous impulse to stroke their sinuous velvet backs, to kiss their magnetic fur. The attraction he felt for Annette was akin to those obscure and innocuous desires, associated with the incessant vibrations of the human nerves, which can never be stilled. Both as an artist and as a man, his eyes were enchanted by her bloom, by the flowering of that exquisite bright life, in which the sap of youth was surging, and perhaps his heart, full of memories of his long intimacy with the Countess and recovering through the extraordinary resemblance between mother and daughter the old emotions, which had lain

dormant since the early days of his passion, had felt a thrill of awakening. An awakening? Was that it? It was an illuminating idea. After years of sleep, he found himself awake again. But if he had unconsciously fallen in love with the child, he would have felt, when he was near her, that rejuvenation of his whole being, which makes a different creature of a man, as soon as the flame of new desire is kindled within him. No, the child had merely breathed upon the ancient fires. It was still the mother whom he loved, but perhaps he loved her a little more because of her daughter, who was the reincarnation of herself. And he summed up the situation in a reassuring fallacy : Love comes but once. The heart may often thrill at some encounter with another being, for everyone exercises upon his neighbour either attraction or repulsion. All these influences beget affections, desires, fancies, ardent and ephemeral passions, but not true love. True love can only exist when two persons are created so entirely for each other, so closely linked together at every point by common tastes, by affinities of body, mind and character, and by an infinite variety of other ties, that they are inseparably bound together. The object of our love, in short, is a man or a woman sprung nameless from the lap of Nature, the universal mother, with the shape, the heart, the mind, the personality, which has an irresistible attraction for our own body, eyes, lips, heart, mind, our physical and intellectual senses. We fall in love with a certain type, that is to say, with the union in one person of all the human qualities which may have appealed to us singly in others. To Oliver the Countess de Guilleroy represented this ideal and he was convinced of it by the permanency of a relationship of which he had never wearied.

Now, physically, Annette resembled her mother in her youth so completely as to delude the eyes. Small wonder, then, if his heart had been taken unawares, without, however, having allowed itself to be carried away. He had worshipped one woman. Another, almost her image, was born of her. He really saw no reason why he should not

bestow upon the second woman the mild affection which was all that remained of that passionate love he had felt for the first. There could be no harm in it, no possible danger. Only his eyes and memory were deluded by this semblance of resurrection. His instincts were immune. Not for one moment had he felt for Annette the faintest stirring of desire. Nevertheless the Countess had accused him of jealousy of the Marquis. Was it true? Again he strictly examined his conscience and had to admit that he really was a little jealous. But after all was that anything surprising? As if one had not always a feeling of jealousy at the sight of another man paying his addresses to any woman whatever! In the street, in a restaurant, at the theatre, what man is there who is not conscious of a slight feeling of hostility towards every cavalier, who passes by with a pretty girl on his arm? Every man who loves a lady, is a rival, a complacent, conquering male, envied by all other males. Besides, without entering further into these physiological considerations, if his affection for Annette was quite naturally somewhat exaggerated by his love for her mother, it was scarcely strange that he should feel a little animosity towards her future husband. But he would speedily master this unworthy sentiment. At the same time he nursed a lingering feeling of resentment which embraced not only the Countess but himself. Would not their everyday relations be embarrassed by this suspicion of which he would always be conscious? He would feel bound to keep watch, with scrupulous and wearisome attention, on all his words and looks, on all his relations with Annette, however trifling. Everything he did or said would have for the mother a sinister meaning.

He returned home, thoroughly upset, and began feverishly smoking cigarette after cigarette, in that state of nervous agitation when a man wastes ten matches before he can light his tobacco. He tried in vain to work. His hand, eyes and mind seemed to have entirely lost their cunning; it was as if they had forgotten, or had never learnt their craft. He set himself to finish a small picture of a blind

man singing at a street corner. But he merely looked at it with an indifference he could not overcome; he felt so utterly incapable of working at it, that he sat there with his palette in his hand, and even as he gazed at it, with fixed but futile attention, he forgot all about it.

Time seemed to stand still, and all at once the interminable minutes were like a consuming fever in his blood.

He could not work. What was he to do with himself until he went to the Club for dinner? The idea of the streets, the crowded pavements, the passers-by, the carriages, the shops, inspired him with weariness and loathing. At the thought of paying visits, of calling on any one of his friends, he felt a sudden detestation of all his acquaintances.

But what should he do with himself? Stride up and down his studio, noting, after each turn, that the hand of the clock had advanced but a few seconds? He knew those wanderings between the door and the cabinet of curios. In his hours of energy and inspiration, of fertility and ready execution, it was an exquisite relaxation to pace the large, bright, cheerful studio which seemed aglow with strenuous endeavour. But in his hours of sterility and discouragement, those miserable hours, when nothing was worth an effort or a movement, it seemed the detestable pacing of a prisoner up and down his cell. If only he could have fallen asleep for one hour, one short hour, on his divan! But he knew that he would never sleep; that he would only fret himself into a fever of exasperation. What was responsible for this sudden attack of black depression?

"My nerves must be in a queer state," he reflected, "for such a trifle to upset me so much."

He thought he would read a book. The *Legend of the Centuries* still lay on the iron seat where Annette had placed it. He opened the volume and read two pages of verse without understanding a word. It might have been written in a foreign tongue. He forced himself to re-read the passage, only to find that the sense still eluded him.

"Evidently I am out of my mind," he exclaimed.

At last he thought of something to while away the two

remaining hours before dinner. He ordered a hot bath and lay in it at full length, relaxed and soothed by the warmth of the water, until his valet, coming in with the towels, woke him from a doze.

Then he went to the Club, where he found all the usual set. They had not seen him for some days and welcomed him back with open arms.

"I have been in the country," he said.

With the exception of Maldant the landscape painter, all his friends expressed their utmost contempt for the country. Rocdiane and Landa, to be sure, went there for the shooting, but their one delight in woods and fields was to see pheasants, quail and partridge fall to their guns, like bunches of tattered feathers, and to watch shot rabbits turning head over heels in the air like clowns, with their white scuts showing at each somersault. Except for these pleasures in the autumn and winter, they declared that the country was deadly.

"Personally, I prefer scarlet women to scarlet runners," remarked Rocdiane.

Dinner was as noisy and cheerful as ever, enlivened by discussions which had never a flash of the unexpected. To distract his mind, Oliver talked freely and kept his friends amused. But after he had had coffee and played sixty up at billiards with Liverdy, the banker, he left the Club. He sauntered from the Madeleine to the Rue Taitbout, passed the door of the Vaudeville three times, debating whether he should go in, was on the point of taking a cab to the Hippodrome, but changed his mind, and strolled in the direction of the Nouveau Cirque; then he swerved abruptly, and without motive, plan or pretext, turned into the Boulevard Malesherbes, his pace slackening as he drew near to Madame de Guilleroy's house.

"She may think it odd of me to come again this evening," he reflected. Then he persuaded himself that there was nothing surprising in his coming a second time to enquire after her health.

She was alone with Annette in the little drawing-room, still busy with the coverlet she was knitting for the poor.

"Is that you, dear friend?" was all that she said when he entered the room.

"Yes, I felt anxious about you and thought I would come to see you. How are you?"

"Pretty well, thank you."

She was silent for a moment. Then she added, significantly:

"And you?"

"Oh, I'm very well, very well indeed," he replied with an easy laugh. "Your fears were utterly unfounded."

She stopped knitting and raised her eyes to his, with a burning glance of entreaty and doubt.

"It's perfectly true," he assured her.

"So much the better," she replied with a somewhat forced smile.

He took a chair, and for the first time in that house, he was seized with an invincible feeling of weariness and a paralysis of the mind, even more complete than that which had come upon him that afternoon, when he had tried to paint.

"You can go on, my dear," said the Countess to her daughter. "You won't disturb us."

"What was she doing?" he asked.

"She was practising a Fantasy."

Annette rose and went to the piano.

Without thinking, he followed her with his eyes, admiring her, as he always did. Then he became conscious of her mother's gaze upon him, and turned his head away abruptly, as if he were looking for something in a dark corner of the room.

The Countess took from her work table a gold cigarette case which he had given her, opened it and handed it to him.

"Do smoke. You know I like it when we are alone."

He took a cigarette, and the piano began to speak. It was music that had charmed a bygone age; graceful airy music, that seemed inspired by some balmy moonlit evening in the spring.

"Who wrote it?" asked Oliver.

"Schumann," replied the Countess. "It's a charming thing and one seldom hears it."

He was conscious of an imperious desire to look at Annette, but he did not dare to do so, though he had only to make the slightest movement, the least little turn of the head. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the flames of the candles on either side of the music, but he was aware of the Countess's vigilant attention, so he sat perfectly still, gazing straight in front of him, as if intent on the rings of grey smoke rising from his cigarette.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" whispered Madame de Guilleroy.

"Don't be vexed with me," he murmured with a smile. "You know that music hypnotises me and absorbs all my thoughts. I will talk presently."

"That reminds me," she said; "I had been learning up something for you just before Mamma died. I have never played it to you, but when the child stops, you shall hear it. It's such a quaint thing."

The Countess had real talent and a subtle comprehension of the emotional element in music. It was in fact one of the most potent charms she exercised upon Oliver's sensibilities.

As soon as Annette had finished Méhul's Pastoral Symphony, the Countess rose and took her place at the piano. A curious melody flowed from her fingers, a melody of which each phrase seemed a lamentation, varied, modulated, repeated, and punctuated by a single note, which recurred again and again, breaking in upon the tuneful passages, marking them, interrupting them, emphasising them, like a cry, ceaseless, monotonous, imperious, the haunting voice of an implacable obsession.

But Oliver was watching Annette, who had seated herself opposite him, and he neither heard nor understood the music. Without thinking, he looked at her, satisfying his soul with the sight of her, as with some wholesome, everyday thing of which he had been lately deprived;

soberly drinking in her beauty, like a thirsty man drinking water.

"Well," said the Countess, "Do you like it?"

He started out of his trance.

"It's wonderful, superb. Whose is it?"

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"What, you really don't know?"

"No."

"It's Schubert's."

"I am not surprised," he assured her in tones of deep conviction. "It's magnificent. Be an angel and play it through again."

She consented, and turning his head he resumed his contemplation of Annette, but this time he listened to the music, in order to enjoy a double pleasure.

Madame de Guilleroy returned to her chair, and at once, with the instinctive duplicity of man, he withdrew his eyes from the ivory profile of the girl, who sat knitting opposite her mother on the other side of the lamp. Yet, although he dared not look at her, he was conscious of the sweetness of her presence, as a man is conscious of the warmth of a blazing hearth. He was harassed by the temptation to steal at Annette swift glances, which he at once diverted to her mother. He felt like a schoolboy tiptoeing to the window that overlooks the street, as soon as the master's back is turned.

He went away early; his tongue was as completely paralysed as his wits, and his persistent silence might have been misconstrued. Once in the street, he was seized with restlessness, for music always lingered in his mind and plunged him into a reverie, which seemed its continuation, dreamy, yet more explicit. The notes sang in his ears. He was haunted by isolated bars, faint and distant, like an echo, dying away into silence, as if to leave the mind free to interpret the music, to roam far afield in search of a tender and harmonious ideal. Attracted by the fairy-like illuminations of the Parc Monceau, he turned into the central walk,

which stretched away in the softening radiance of the arc lamps. A keeper was slowly making his rounds; now and then a belated cab drove past. On a bench, at the foot of a bronze standard supporting a shining globe, sat a man reading a newspaper in a flood of dazzling, blueish light. Other lamps, planted amongst the trees that dotted the lawns, shed upon the leaves and grass their strong, cold rays, lending to the spacious city gardens a pale semblance of life.

With his hands behind his back, Oliver wandered along the path, thinking of his walk with Annette in this same park, that day when he had first caught upon her lips the inflections of her mother's voice. He threw himself on to a bench, and breathed in the fresh savour of the newly watered lawns. He was assailed by those passionate hopes, that transform a young man's soul to a chaotic canvas on which is depicted an unending romance of love. In earlier days he had known such evenings, evenings of wandering imagination, when he had let his roaming fancy embark upon wonderful adventures, and he was surprised to find himself visited again by these sensations which were so alien to his years. But like that persistent note in Schubert's melody, the thought of Annette, the sight of her face in the lamplight as she sat over her work, the grotesque suspicions of the Countess, kept returning to his mind. In spite of himself, he kept brooding upon that same question; sounding the impenetrable depths, where human emotions germinate before they come to birth. He was disturbed by this obstinate introspection; his incessant preoccupation with Annette seemed to open to his soul a vista of sentimental dreams. He could not banish her from his thoughts; he was possessed by an emanation of herself, just as in the old days he had retained a strange sense of her mother's presence within his studio, after she had left him.

In sudden revolt against the tyranny of memory, he sprang up from his seat.

"It was absurd of Annie to suggest such a thing," he

exclaimed. "Now she has put ideas about the child into my head."

Uneasy about himself he returned home. As soon as he was in bed, he realised that sleep was an impossibility; there was a fever in his blood, the must of dreams was seething in his heart. Dreading an attack of insomnia, that exhausting form of insomnia which is due to mental agitation, he thought he would read a book. Many a time, a few pages had served him as a narcotic. He rose and went to his bookcase to choose some solid and soporific work. But in spite of himself, his mind was wide awake and eager for some keen sensation, and he searched the shelves for a writer in sympathy with his mood of rapturous expectation. Balzac, for whom he had a passion, made no appeal to him this evening. He scorned Victor Hugo, despised Lamartine, although he always stirred his emotions, but he seized eagerly upon Musset, the poet of youth. He took a volume, intending to dip into its pages. As soon as he had returned to bed, he began to drink in with the thirst of a drunken man, the graceful verses of that inspired poet, who sang, like a bird, of the dawn of life, whose breath failed when the morning had passed, so that he was silent before the violence of day; that poet, who was first and foremost a man intoxicated with life, proclaiming his transports in splendid trumpet flourishes of ingenuous love, reverberating with all the desires that thrill the heart of youth.

Never before had Oliver so fully appreciated the physical charm of these poems, which stir the senses, while hardly touching the mind. With his eyes on the entrancing verses, he felt that he had the soul of a boy of twenty thrilling with hope, and he read nearly the whole volume in a juvenile ecstasy. Three o'clock struck, and he was surprised to find that he was still not sleepy. He rose to close the window and to lay the book on the table in the middle of the room. But his contact with the cold night air sent a twinge of pain, which had not yielded entirely to his seasons at Aix, through the small of his back, like a warning, a reminder. With an

impatient gesture he tossed the poems on to the table, exclaiming:

"What an old fool I am!"

Then he returned to bed and blew out his candle.

The next day he did not call on the Countess, and he sternly resolved to avoid her house for another two days. But whatever he did, whether he attempted to paint, or to take a walk, or trailed gloomily from one friend's house to another, his invincible preoccupation with the two women continued to torment him. Denying himself the sight of them, he sought relief in thinking of the Countess and Annette, and he let his mind and heart feast upon his memories of them. Now and then in the soothing hallucinations of solitude their two faces, with the differences of which he was aware, would draw together. Presently one would impose itself upon the other, until the two were mingled and blended together into a composite countenance, a little blurred in outline, which was neither that of the mother nor yet entirely that of the daughter, but the face of a woman passionately loved, once, now and forever.

Then his conscience smote him for letting himself glide down the perilous slope of these insidious emotions. To escape them, to resist them, to break the trammels of that fascinating and delicious dream, he directed his thoughts to every conceivable idea, to every possible subject of meditation. His efforts were in vain. All the diverging paths he followed, led back to the same place, where the face of a rosy girl seemed to lie in wait for him. He was haunted by a vague and persistent obsession, which hovered above him, circled around him and barred the way, twist and turn as he might, in his efforts to escape. His confusing of the two women, which had so deeply disturbed him on that evening walk in the park at Roncières, came back to him the moment he ceased to reason and reflect; he conjured them up in an effort to understand the extraordinary emotion with which he was palpitating.

"Let me see," he said to himself, "do I really care for Annette more than I ought to?"

Then, probing his heart, he found that it was consumed with love for a woman, who was young and had all Annette's features, but was nevertheless not Annette. And with cowardly evasion, he assured himself:

"No, I'm not in love with the child. I am the victim of her likeness to her mother."

Yet his two days at Roncières dwelt in his soul like a well-spring of warmth and happiness and rapture. One by one, the smallest details came back to him, as distinct and even more delectable than at the actual time. As he retraced his memories, he saw again the road they had followed on their way from the cemetery; and recalling Annette with her posies, he suddenly remembered that he had promised her a cornflower of sapphires as soon as they returned to Paris.

All his good resolutions were scattered to the winds, and without further resistance, he seized his hat and left the house thrilled with his anticipation of the child's delight.

He was informed by the footman that the Countess was out, but that Mademoiselle Annette was at home.

He felt a keen throb of joy.

"Ask her if I can see her."

Stepping lightly, as if afraid of being heard, he slipped into the drawing-room.

Almost immediately Annette appeared.

"How do you do, dear Master?" she said demurely.

He laughed, shook hands with her, and sat down beside her.

"Guess why I have come."

"I don't know," she said after a moment's thought.

"To take you and your mother to the jeweller's to choose the sapphires for the cornflower I promised you at Roncières."

The girl's face lit up with rapture.

"Oh dear," she said, "and now Mamma has gone out.

But she will be back presently. You will wait, won't you?"

"Yes, if she isn't too long."

"Oh, what a wretch! Too long, with me to amuse you? You treat me like a schoolgirl."

"No," he replied, "not as much as you think."

He was conscious of an intense desire to please, to show himself gallant and witty as in the dashing days of his youth—that instinctive impulse which stimulates the powers of fascination, which makes a peacock spread its tail, and a poet write verses. Swift and sparkling the words sprang to his lips. He talked with all the brilliancy of his happiest hours, and stimulated by his verve, Annette responded with all the sprightliness, the delicate archness latent within her. Suddenly in the middle of some argument, he exclaimed:

"Why, you have said the same thing to me over and over again, and I keep on telling you . . ."

Laughing, Annette broke in upon him:

"I believe you take me for Mamma!"

He coloured and was silent for a moment. Then he said, haltingly:

"You see, I have heard your mother make the same assertion at least a hundred times."

After this, his burst of eloquence flickered out; he could think of nothing to say, and he now felt a dread, a nameless dread, of this child.

"Here is Mamma," she cried.

She had heard the door of the first drawing-room open. As confused as if he had been discovered in some fault, he explained how he had suddenly remembered his promise and had come to take both of them to the jeweller.

"I have a brougham waiting; there's room for me on the folding seat."

They drove away and a few minutes later they entered Montara's showroom. All his life Oliver had enjoyed the close companionship and affection of women, and the opportunity of observing them closely. His study of the sex had obliged him to investigate and discover their tastes, to under-

stand dress, questions of fashion, and the little details of their private lives, as well as they themselves did, and he had gradually come to share with them certain feminine sensations. Whenever he entered a shop, where the dainty and charming accessories of beauty were displayed, he felt almost as keen a thrill of pleasure as a woman. He took the same interest in the captivating nothings with which they adorn themselves; silks and satins delighted his eyes; he loved to handle laces; the most trifling of dainty little knick-knacks had a charm for him. He felt a certain pious reverence for the showcases in jewellers' shops, as if they were shrines of luxurious seduction, and he regarded with respect the counter covered with dark cloth, on which the precious stones flashed beneath the jeweller's flexible fingers.

At his request, the Countess and Annette seated themselves at the counter and with an instinctive gesture each laid a hand upon its unadorned surface. Oliver explained his requirements, and was shown designs of different flowers. A quantity of sapphires were spread out in front of them, and of these they were to select four. It was a lengthy proceeding. After turning them over and over on the cloth with their finger tips, the ladies picked them up carefully, held them up to the light, and examined them with passionate and critical attention. When the four stones they had selected were put aside, they had to choose three emeralds for the leaves, and a tiny brilliant, which was to quiver in the centre of the flower like a dewdrop.

Then Oliver, revelling in the delights of giving, said to the Countess:

"Will you do me the favour of choosing two rings?"

"Do you mean me?"

"Yes, one for you and one for Annette. You must let me give you these little presents as a souvenir of the two days I spent with you at Roncières."

She refused, but he insisted. A long argument ensued, a wordy conflict, from which he at last emerged triumphant. A selection of rings was displayed; the choicest reposed

singly in separate cases, while the others were arranged in rows, according to their quality, in large square boxes with velvet linings, which showed up the diversity of their settings. Seated between the ladies, Oliver exhibited the same passionate interest, picking the golden circlets one by one out of their narrow niches. Then he laid them down on the counter in two heaps, one containing those that were at once rejected, the other those from which the final choice was to be made. Imperceptibly the moments slipped away in this pleasing task of selection, which is a more entrancing pastime than all the entertainments of society; as enthralling, as diverting as a play; an appealing, exquisite, almost sensuous delight to the heart of woman. They all entered into it with zest, and after some hesitation the choice of the three judges fell upon a little serpent in gold, holding a fine ruby between its tiny jaws and its twisted tail.

Beaming with satisfaction, Oliver rose from his chair:

"I will leave you the carriage," he said, "I have some things to do, so I will say good-bye."

But Annette begged her mother to walk home, as it was such a lovely day. The Countess consented and after thanking Oliver, she and Annette set out through the streets. At first both were silent, absorbed in their delight at Oliver's gifts. Then they began to talk about all the different jewels they had seen and handled. Something of their glitter, their tinkle, their sparkle, lingered in their minds. They walked quickly, gliding through the crowds that parade the pavements at five o'clock on a summer afternoon. Men turned their heads to look at Annette, and passed her with a vague murmur of admiration. This was the first time, since they had gone into mourning, the first time, since Annette had worn those black clothes which rendered her beauty so dazzling, that the Countess had been out with her in Paris. Her sense of this petty triumph of the streets, the attention Annette attracted, the whispered compliments, the little eddies of flattering emotion, which a pretty woman leaves in her wake as she passes through a throng of men,

clutched at her heart, convulsing it with the same strange pang she had suffered the other evening in her own drawing-room, when the child was being compared to her mother's portrait. Involuntarily she kept on the alert for these glances which Annette attracted. She felt them coming in the distance, flitting across her own countenance, without lingering there, and suddenly settling upon the pink and white face at her side. She understood; she could read in men's eyes their spontaneous and silent homage to Annette's youthful radiance, to the alluring charm of her bloom, and she thought to herself:

"I used to be just as pretty, if anything, prettier." Suddenly the thought of Oliver flashed across her mind, and again, as at Roncières, she was seized with an imperious yearning to escape. She felt that she could not remain here in this brilliant daylight, in this stream of humanity, exposed to the eyes of all these men, not one of whom spared her a glance. How remote, and yet how recent, were those days when she had welcomed and challenged comparison with her daughter. And to-day, out of all that throng, who would dream of comparing them? One man, perhaps, a moment ago, in the jeweller's shop. Oliver? Oh, the agony of it! Surely his mind must be continually haunted by the thought of this comparison. How could he see them together and fail to dwell upon it, fail to remember the days, when young and fair, she would come to him, confident of his love?

"I am not feeling well, my dear," she said, "we will take a cab."

"What is the matter, Mamma?" asked Annette anxiously.

"It is nothing. You know, since your Grandmother's death, I often have these little attacks of faintness."

V

FIXED ideas have the gnawing tenacity of incurable diseases. Once admitted to the soul, they devour it and deprive it of the liberty to think, of the slightest interest in anything. Whatever she did, wherever she was, at home or abroad, alone or in society, the Countess could not rid herself of the idea which had flashed upon her as she was walking home with her daughter. Seeing them nearly every day as he did, how could Oliver help being obsessed by this idea of comparing them? It was inevitable. He was haunted by the resemblance, which could never for one moment be forgotten, which was emphasised, moreover, by their once studied mimicry of each other's words and mannerisms. Whenever he entered the room, she at once began to think of this mental juxtaposition; she could read it in his eyes; she could discern it in his heart; she could detect it in his brain. And at once she was tortured with a craving to hide herself, to disappear and never again to show herself to him, with her daughter by her side. But she suffered in other respects as well. She no longer felt at home in her own house. That painful impression which had come over her that evening when Annette had stood by her mother's portrait, that sense of dispossession, increased, till it sometimes exasperated her. She reproached herself continually for this secret yearning for deliverance, this unavoidable eagerness to turn her daughter out of her house, as one rids oneself of a persistent and unwelcome guest. Inspired by the necessity for struggling to keep at all costs the man she loved, she worked with subconscious adroitness towards that end. Their recent loss made it impossible to hurry on

Annette's marriage unduly. She felt a vague and yet violent terror, lest some accident should hinder her project, and almost involuntarily she did all she could to foster in Annette an affection for the Marquis. All the delicate diplomacy of which she had availed herself for years for preserving Oliver's devotion, now took a new form, at once more subtle and secret. She endeavoured to bring the young people together, while she prevented the two men from meeting.

Restricted by his habits of work, Oliver never went out to luncheon, and as a rule devoted only his evenings to his friends. Accordingly, she frequently invited the Marquis to luncheon. He would come in aglow with his ride and the fresh morning air, and he would merrily recount all the society gossip which is wafted about the rides of the Bois, when Paris, brilliant, equestrian Paris, awakes for the autumn season. Annette enjoyed listening to his chatter about each day's amusements, which he poured out all fresh and glittering from the mint of fashion. A youthful friendship sprang up between them, an affectionate intimacy, natural to their years, and deepened by their common passion for horses. When he left the house the Countess and her husband tactfully sang his praises, giving Annette to understand that she was welcome to marry him if she cared for him. For her part, Annette was quick to grasp the situation, and after frankly considering it, she calmly decided to accept the handsome young man, who, among other pleasures, could offer her the supreme delight of a daily gallop on a thoroughbred.

One day, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, they exchanged a smile and a clasp of the hand and found themselves engaged; and the marriage was discussed as if it had been settled long ago. After this, the Marquis began to shower presents upon Annette, while the Duchess treated her like her own daughter. Thus, by mutual agreement, the whole affair had been gently incubated by the mild warmth of friendship, in the sober light of day, for the

Marquis, who had many other claims upon him, family ties, duties and obligations, seldom came in the evening.

It was then Oliver's turn. He dined regularly once a week with his friends, and was always dropping in unexpectedly for a cup of tea between ten o'clock and midnight.

As soon as he came in, the Countess, who was burning to know all that was in his heart, kept watching him. Not a glance, not a gesture escaped her; and she was tortured by this thought:

"He cannot help loving her, when he sees us two together."

Oliver, too, kept bringing gifts. Not a week passed without his arriving with two little parcels in his hand, one for the mother, and one for the daughter. And as the Countess opened the boxes, which often contained some valuable present, her heart would contract. How well she could interpret this passion for bestowing, which she, as a woman, had never been able to gratify, this yearning to bring some offering, to give pleasure, to spend money on someone, to search the shops for some trifle that might please. In the old days, Oliver had passed through this same phase. How often she had seen him enter with the very same smile, the very same gesture, and a little parcel in his hand! After a time this passion had subsided, and now it was reviving. For whose sake? She had no doubt whatever. It was certainly not for hers.

He looked thin and worn, and she guessed that he was suffering. As he came in, she compared his look, his aspect, his manner, with the attitude of the Marquis, on whom, likewise, Annette's charm was beginning to make an impression. But there was a vital difference. Monsieur de Farandal was captivated, but Oliver was in love. So at least she believed in her hours of torture, though in her moments of relief, she still hoped that she might be deceived.

Often when they were alone, she was on the point of questioning him, imploring and beseeching him to speak, to confess everything, to conceal nothing. She would rather

weep over a certainty than endure this agony of doubt, this inability to read his heart, in which she suspected the growth of this new love.

That heart of his, dearer to her than life itself, which for twelve years she had watched over, rekindling and reviving it with her own ardour; that heart of which she had felt so sure, which she fondly hoped was hers at last, once and for all, conquered, subdued, passionately devoted to her till the end of their days, was now escaping her through an inconceivable, frightful and monstrous fatality. All at once it had closed around a secret. She could no longer enter, with one familiar word, and cherish her love as in some sure retreat, to which she alone had access. What is the use of loving, of giving oneself without reserve, if he, to whom one has dedicated one's whole being, one's whole life, all that one possessed upon this earth, can suddenly desert one for the charm of a new face, and in the space of a few days become almost a stranger?

Oliver a stranger? He spoke to her as he had always done, using the same words, the same inflections, the same tones. And yet something had come between them, inexplicable, intangible, and invincible, like an infinitesimal change of wind which sets a ship drifting away into the distance.

In truth he was drifting away from her a little farther every day, with every glance he stole at Annette. Oliver himself made no fresh attempt to look into his heart. He could feel the seething passion within him, he was conscious of an irresistible attraction, but he shut his eyes to its significance; he put his trust in the future and in the unforeseen chances of life.

He lived for nothing but his evenings with these two women, whom their mourning cut off from all social functions. Meeting at their house only casual acquaintances like the Corbelles and Musadieu, he had almost the illusion of being alone with them in the world, and as he never saw either the Duchess or the Marquis, for whom the mornings and afternoons were reserved, he banished them from his mind,

and supposed that the marriage had been postponed to some indefinite future.

Annette herself never mentioned Monsieur de Farandal in his presence. Perhaps she was deterred by an instinct of modesty, perhaps by one of those secret intuitions by which the heart of woman is warned of unknown dangers.

The weeks passed by, bringing no change into their existence. Autumn had come and Parliament was to meet at an earlier date than usual, on account of the dangerous political situation.

The Guilleroys were giving a luncheon party at their house, and afterwards the Count was to escort Madame de Mortemain, the Marquis and Annette to the opening of Parliament. The Countess, however, who felt cut off from the rest of the world by her ever increasing misery, had declared her intention of staying at home.

Luncheon was over; and the party were having coffee in the drawing-room and chatting gaily. The Count, who was looking forward with delight to resuming his parliamentary duties, was discoursing almost brilliantly on the present conditions and the difficulties with which the Republic was beset. The Marquis, very obviously in love, kept looking at Annette, while replying with animation to her father, and the Duchess was almost equally delighted with her nephew's passion and the embarrassments of the Republic. The air of the room was impregnated with the heat of newly lighted stoves; hangings, carpets and walls radiated warmth, and the flowers quickly lost their fragrance in the asphyxiating atmosphere. This cosy room, to which the coffee contributed its aroma, had about it a certain intimate and familiar charm. Suddenly the door opened and Oliver Bertin stood on the threshold. He was so completely taken aback that he stood where he was, not attempting to enter the room; in utter amazement, like an injured husband confronted with his wife's infidelity. Almost suffocating with confused anger, he could not but realise, from the violence of his emotion, that his heart was consumed through and through with a passion of love.

Everything that had been concealed from him, everything to which he himself had been wilfully blind, now flashed upon him as he saw the Marquis, installed in the house as Annette's betrothed. With a shock of resentment, he realised all that he had purposely ignored and all that no one had ventured to tell him. There was no need to ask why these preparations for the marriage had been kept from him. The reason was clear enough. His eyes grew hard, and as they met the Countess's glance, she blushed. Each understood the other.

After he sat down, there was a slight pause; his unexpected appearance had checked their flow of spirits. Then the Duchess engaged him in conversation; he answered curtly, in a voice which sounded suddenly strange and altered.

He glanced around him at all these people, who were now resuming their interrupted conversations.

"They have made a fool of me," he reflected. "They shall pay for this."

His chief resentment was directed at the Countess and Annette, whose innocent duplicity was suddenly revealed to him.

"It's time we were off," said the Count with a glance at the clock. He turned to Bertin: "We are all going to the opening of Parliament, except my wife who is staying at home. I should be delighted if you would come with us."

"No, thank you," said Oliver drily. "Your Chamber has no attractions for me."

Annette went up to him and said playfully:

"Oh, please come, dear Master. I am sure you will be much more amusing than those Deputies."

"No, really. You will enjoy yourself just as much without me."

Conscious that he was feeling hurt and angry, she tried to coax him.

"Yes, do come, Monsieur Bertin. Really and truly I can't get on without you."

The words rose to his lips so swiftly that he could neither check them, nor control the tone of his voice.

"Nonsense! You can get on perfectly well without me, just like everyone else."

She was a little taken aback by his vehemence.

"There you are calling me '*vous*' again," she cried.

His lips were twisted into one of those convulsive smiles which betray all the bitterness of the soul. With a slight bow, he replied:

"Sooner or later I must get into the way of it."

"Why should you?"

"Because you will presently be getting married, and your husband, whoever he may be, will have a right to object to my familiarity."

The Countess hastily intervened.

"It will be time enough then to think of it. But I hope Annette will not marry a man so sensitive as to take exception to the ways of her old friend."

"Come along, come along," cried the Count. "We must be going, or we shall be late."

All who were to be of his party rose and shook hands with the Countess, while the Duchess, who always kissed Madame de Guilleroy and her daughter on meeting and parting, embraced her.

The curtained doors closed behind them. Oliver and the Countess remained alone.

"Sit down, dear friend," she said gently.

"No, thank you," he replied almost fiercely. "I'm going away too."

"But why?" she murmured pleadingly.

"Because I have evidently come at the wrong time. I apologise for intruding upon you without warning."

"Oliver, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I merely regret having broken up the pleasant party you had arranged."

She seized his hand.

"They were just going, or they would have been late for

the opening. I always meant to stay at home. It was, on the contrary, a happy inspiration on your part to come today when I am all by myself."

"A happy inspiration?" he sneered. "It was indeed."

She seized him by both wrists, and looking deep into his eyes, she whispered almost inaudibly:

"Confess that you love her."

In uncontrollable irritation, he broke away from her.

"You are perfectly crazy on that subject."

Again she caught him by the arms, her fingers convulsively clutching his sleeves.

"Oliver," she entreated, "confess, confess. I would rather you told me. I am convinced of it, but I would rather you told me. I would far rather know. Oh, you cannot imagine what my life has become."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I do? Am I to blame if you have taken leave of your senses?"

Panting, clinging to him, clutching him by the coat, she drew him into the boudoir beyond, where no one could hear them. She led him to a little round settee, and forced him to sit down beside her.

"Oliver, my friend, my only friend, I implore you; confess to me that you love her. I know it. I am convinced of it by everything you do. I cannot help believing it. But though it kills me, I must hear the truth from your own lips."

As he still protested, she sank on her knees at his feet, moaning in broken tones:

"Oh, my friend, my friend, my only friend, is it true that you love her?"

He tried to raise her from the ground.

"No," he cried, "and again no. Upon my honour."

She laid her hand on his lips to silence him.

"Oh, do not lie to me," she faltered. "It hurts me so."

Bowing her head till it rested upon his knees, she burst into sobs.

All he could see was the nape of her neck with its masses

of fair hair, in which threads of silver were plentifully mingled, and his heart was flooded by overwhelming pity and overwhelming pain. Grasping her heavy tresses with both hands, with a sudden impulse, he raised her head towards him and upon her despairing eyes, from which the tears were streaming, he rained kiss after kiss, murmuring over and over again:

"Annie, Annie, my dear, dear Annie."

She tried to smile, and in the broken accents of a child choking with grief, she faltered:

"Oh, my friend, only tell me that you still care for me a little."

He kissed her again.

"Indeed I do, dear Annie."

She rose from her knees, resumed her seat by his side, and once more clasping his hands, gazed at him.

"We have been lovers so long," she said tenderly. "It ought not to end like this."

Pressing her close to him:

"Why should it end?" he asked.

"Because I am old, and because Annette is too like what I was when you first knew me."

It was now his turn to lay his hand upon her sorrowful lips.

"Again?" he cried. "No more of this, for heaven's sake. I swear to you that you are utterly mistaken."

"If only you will love me a little!" she replied.

"I do love you," he said again.

For a long time they sat in silence, holding each other's hands, both deeply moved, deeply distressed.

At last she broke the silence:

"The rest of the days that remain to me will not be very happy ones."

"I shall try to make them sweet to you."

Though it was still two hours till dusk, the gloom of the overcast sky stole into the room, gradually enveloping them in the grey mistiness of an autumn evening.

They heard a clock strike.

"We have been here a long time," she said. "You had better go. Someone might come, and we are neither of us composed."

He rose and clasped her in his arms, and as in the old days, he kissed her parted lips. Arm in arm, like a husband and wife, they passed through the two drawing-rooms.

"Farewell, dear friend."

"Farewell, my love."

The curtain fell behind him. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he went downstairs, and turned in the direction of the Madeleine. He felt dazed, as if he had received a blow; there was no strength in his limbs, and his heart was burning and throbbing, as if a live flame were flickering in his bosom. For three hours or more he walked straight ahead, in a state of mental and physical exhaustion, which left him just strength enough to put one foot before the other. Then he went home to think it over.

So it was true. He was in love with the child. At last it was all clear to him — everything he had felt in her presence, since that walk in the Parc Monceau, when he had caught upon her lips the old appeal of a voice he scarcely recognised, that voice which had once thrilled his heart; the gradual and irresistible revival of a love, that still smouldered on, never wholly extinguished, a revival which he had obstinately refused to acknowledge.

And now what was he to do? What indeed? Once Annette was married, he would avoid seeing her too often; that was the only thing. In the meantime he must continue to frequent the Guilleroy's house as usual, so that no one should suspect the existence of a secret which he was resolved to conceal from the whole world.

For once in his life, he dined at home. Then, as it promised to be a bitterly cold night, he ordered a fire in the big stove in his studio. As if he feared the darkness lurking in the corners of the room, he had the chandelier lighted. Then he locked himself in. What was this weird

emotion, so profound, so appallingly mournful, that gripped him like a physical pain? He could feel it in his throat, his chest, in his strengthless muscles, as well as in his fainting soul. The studio walls oppressed him. His whole life was enclosed within them, his life as a man, his life as an artist. Every study that hung there recalled some triumph; every stick of furniture spoke of some memory. But triumphs and memories were things of the past. And what of his life? How short it seemed to him, how crowded and yet how empty! He had produced pictures, and yet more pictures, and he had loved one woman. He remembered evenings of rapture, after her trysts with him in this same studio, how he had paced the room all night long, in a delirium of ecstasy. The bliss of happy love, of worldly success, the supreme intoxication of fame had afforded him unforgettable hours of inward triumph.

He had loved one woman, and this woman had returned his love. She had initiated him into the mysterious world of passion and emotion. Almost by force, she had unlocked his heart, and now he could not close it again. In spite of himself, a new love was entering through that breach, a new love, or rather the old love, fanned into a hotter blaze by the charm of a fresh face and intensified by all the violence with which advancing years invest the natural instinct for worship. Well then, he was in love with the child. There was no further need for him to struggle and resist and deny. He loved her in the agonising certainty that she would never bestow even a little pity upon him, that she would never be aware of his appalling agonies, and that another man would wed her. At this thought, which returned again and again, refusing to be banished, he had a brutish longing to howl like a dog on a chain; for he felt equally helpless, equally enslaved, equally in bondage. More and more overstrung, the longer he brooded, he continued to stride up and down the spacious studio, brilliantly lighted as if for a reception. At last, unable to endure further the agony of his exacerbated wound, he endeavoured to soothe it with memories of his

early love, to allay it by the evocation of his first deep passion. From the cupboard where he kept it, he took his own copy of his portrait of the Countess. Placing it upon the easel, he sat down in front of it and gazed at it. He tried to picture her, to restore her to life again, such as she was in the old days when he had loved her. But it was always Annette who rose upon the canvas. The mother had faded away and vanished, leaving in her place that other face, which so strangely resembled her own. It was Annette who appeared before him, her hair just a shade fairer than her mother's; her smile a little more teasing; her manner a little more arch, and he felt that this young creature mastered him body and soul, as the other had never done; even as the waves master a sinking ship.

At last he rose, and to hide the apparition from his sight, he turned the picture with its face to the easel. Then, steeped to the lips in misery, he went into his bedroom and returned to the studio with the writing-table drawer, where all his mistress's letters reposed. Piled up together, they formed a deep layer of thin, small sheets of notepaper. He plunged his hands into the midst of all this eloquent record of their love; into this welter of their long-enduring passion. He gazed at the narrow coffin of wood, which enclosed all those envelopes, heaped one upon the other, inscribed with his name, and his name only.

He reflected that a whole romance, the tender and mutual devotion of two human beings, the history of two hearts, was revealed in these reams of yellowing pages , which were marked here and there with blotches of red sealing-wax. As he bent over them, he breathed in the stale perfume, the melancholy scent, that clings about letters that have been long locked away.

He thought he would read them over, and, groping in the back of the drawer, he brought out a handful of the earliest letters. As he unfolded them, they released a flood of vivid memories, which moved him to the soul. Many of them he recognised, having carried them on his person for weeks on

end, and in every line of the delicate writing which expressed such tender thoughts, he recovered the thrill of old emotions, long since forgotten. Suddenly his fingers came upon a dainty embroidered handkerchief. What was its story? He puzzled over it for a moment, then remembered. One day at his house, she had wept because he had made her jealous, and he had stolen her handkerchief, all wet with her tears, and had kept it.

Ah, how sad it all was, how sad! Unhappy woman!

From the depths of the drawer, from the depths of the past, all these memories rose like a mist. And what were they indeed but an impalpable mist, emanating from a reality that had ceased to be. None the less they harrowed his feelings. He wept over the letters, as one weeps over the dead, because they are no more.

But all this stirring of the ancient love served only to kindle within him a new and youthful ardour, an irrepressible surging of affection, which recalled to his mind Annette's radiant face. He had loved her mother in a passionate transport of voluntary servitude, but he loved the child like a slave, an old, trembling slave, on whom were rivetted fetters which he could never hope to break. He was conscious of it in the depths of his being and he was beside himself with fear.

He tried to discover how and why it was that she could thus possess him. He hardly knew her. She was no more than a girl, whose heart and mind had not yet awakened from the dreams of youth. As for him, he had almost reached the end of his days. How had this child come to entangle him in her smiles and the meshes of her hair? Ah, those smiles of hers, those shining tresses! For their sake he could have thrown himself on his knees and prostrated himself before her.

Do we know, can we ever tell, why of a sudden a woman's face works upon us like a poison? It is as if a man's eyes had drunk her in, until she became part of his mind, part of his very flesh. Intoxicated, delirious, he lives upon her

image and would fain die of it. What agonies we suffer at times from this fierce and incomprehensible tyranny, exercised by one particular face upon a man's heart.

Oliver resumed his roamings. As the night advanced, the stove went out, and through the closed windows the cold air slowly penetrated. He went to bed and lay till daybreak haunted by painful thoughts. He rose early, he hardly knew why; he had no idea what to do with himself. His nerves were on edge and he felt as irresolute as a weathercock.

While he was seeking distraction and occupation for mind and body, he remembered that this was the day of the week on which certain members of his club met at the Bain Maure, where they always lunched after their massage. In the hope that the hot-room and the showerbath would have a soothing effect upon his nerves, he dressed quickly and left the house.

As soon as he set foot out of doors, the sharp air seized upon him, the bracing cold of the first frost, which in a single night destroys the last lingering vestiges of summer. All along the boulevards, a shower of great, yellow leaves was fluttering to the ground with a low, crisp rustle. From end to end of the wide avenues with rows of houses on either side, as far as the eye could see, the foliage was falling, as if all the stalks had been severed from the branches by a thin, keen blade of ice. Pavements and roadways were already carpeted, and for some hours they looked like forest paths at the beginning of winter. The dead leaves crackled underfoot, swept here and there into gentle undulations by a puff of wind.

It was one of those days of transition which mark the end of one season and the beginning of the next, and possess a peculiar charm, or a peculiar melancholy, the melancholy of decay, or the charm of resurrection.

As he crossed the threshold of the Bain Maure, the idea of the warmth which would presently permeate his body, chilled by his walk through the icy streets, sent a thrill of pleasant anticipation through Oliver's heavy heart. He un-

dressed quickly, wound round his waist the strip of towelling which the attendant handed him, and disappeared through the padded door, held open before him. As he traversed a Moorish gallery, lighted by two Oriental lamps, he was met by a burst of hot, oppressive air, which seemed to come from some distant furnace. A woolly-headed negro with gleaming body and muscular limbs, wearing only a waistcloth round his loins, darted forward and raised the curtain at the far end for Bertin to pass through into the great, round, lofty hot-room, which was almost as silent and mysterious as a temple. Through the cupola and trefoil windows of coloured glass the daylight descended into the immense, flagged circular hall, of which the walls were decorated with faïences in the Arab style. Men of all ages, almost naked, were silently pacing up and down, reclining with folded arms on the marble benches, or chatting in undertones.

As Oliver entered, the scorching air made him pant. Over this stifling and ornate rotunda, in which human bodies sweltered, and swarthy Moorish masseurs with copper-coloured limbs, went to and fro, brooded an atmosphere of mystery and antiquity.

The first face Oliver saw was that of Count de Landa. He was stalking about the hall, like a Roman wrestler, showing off his mighty chest and his huge arms, which were folded upon it. Hot-rooms were his favourite haunts; he felt like a popular actor on the stage, and he could pronounce with authority on the muscular development of all the strong men in Paris.

"Good-morning, Bertin," he said.

They shook hands.

"The right sort of weather for sweating, what?" said Landa.

"Splendid."

"Have you seen Rocdiane? He is over there. I caught him just as he was getting out of bed. Do look at that fellow's physique."

A little gentleman strolled past, whose knock-knees, thin

arms and lean hips provoked a smile of contempt from these two elderly models of human vigour.

Rocdiane, who had caught sight of Oliver, joined them. They sat down on a long marble table and began to chat as if they were in a drawing-room. Waiters wandered about the room with trays of glasses. The masseurs could be heard slapping away at the bare flesh, while the sudden gush of the showerbaths was mingled with the continual plashing of water, which filled every corner of the great amphitheatre with a pattering like rain.

Every moment some new arrival nodded to the three friends or came to shake hands with them. Among them were the portly Duke d'Harisson, little Prince Epilati, and Baron Flach.

"Oh, there's Farandal," exclaimed Rocdiane.

The Marquis came into the room with his hands on his hips, walking with the careless grace of a man of fine physique, who is always perfectly sure of himself.

"The fellow looks like a gladiator," murmured Landa.

Rocdiane turned to Bertin.

"Is it true that he is going to marry your friend's daughter?"

"Yes, I believe so," replied Oliver.

This question, addressed to him in the presence of the man himself at such a moment and in such surroundings struck Oliver to the heart with a violent shock of anguish and revolt. In a moment the full horror of those dimly imagined realities flashed upon him so vividly that he had to struggle with a savage impulse to fling himself upon the Marquis.

He rose to his feet.

"I am tired," he said. "I'm going to have my massage at once. Are you disengaged, Ahmed?" he asked an Arab attendant who was passing.

"Yes, sir."

He went hurriedly away to avoid having to shake hands with Farandal, who was leisurely making the rounds of the

baths. He remained barely a quarter of an hour in the cooling-room, so tranquil with its girdle of cubicles and couches, and its central group of African plants, clustering around a spraying jet of water. He felt as if someone were following him and threatening him; as if the Marquis would presently join him, take his outstretched hand and force him to treat like a friend the man whom he was longing to kill. Soon he was out on the boulevard again, with its covering of dead leaves which had now ceased to fall, the last of them having been shaken down by a prolonged gust. Right across the road stretched the red and yellow carpet, quivering and billowing at each fierce puff of the rising wind.

With a sudden roar, like the howl of a beast, the gale swept across the housetops, and a furious blast which seemed to come from the Madeleine, rushed down the boulevard. As if they had awaited its coming, the leaves, the whole host of fallen leaves, rose to greet it. They drove before it in eddying masses, whirling upwards into the air until they reached the level of the roofs. The wind harried them like a flock of sheep, a panic stricken flock, scurrying and fleeing towards the boundaries of Paris, to gain the open skies of the suburbs. When the dense cloud of leaves and dust had vanished above the lofty buildings of the Malesherbes quarter, roadways and pavements looked strangely bare and clean-swept.

"What is to become of me?" Bertin thought to himself. "What shall I do? Where shall I go?"

Unable to think of anything, he turned towards home. A newspaper kiosk caught his eye, and he bought seven or eight papers, in the hope of finding distraction for an hour or two.

"I will lunch at home," he said, as he entered his house and went up to his studio.

But as soon as he sat down, he knew that he was too restless to remain there; his whole body was possessed with the frenzy of a rabid animal. He skimmed the newspapers, but

they could not distract his soul even for a moment. He followed them only with his eyes, and not with his mind. In the middle of an article, however, which he was not attempting to grasp, he was brought up sharp by the name of Guilleroy. It occurred in a report of the meeting of Parliament, when the Count had delivered a few remarks. Roused by this magic word, his attention was immediately afterwards caught by the name of Montrosé, the famous tenor, who was to make his one and only appearance at the Opera towards the end of December. This, the journal declared, would be a momentous occasion in the musical world. Montrosé, who had left Paris six years previously, had won unprecedented triumphs in his tours through Europe and America. Moreover, he was to have the support of the renowned Swedish singer, Helsson, who had likewise not been heard in Paris for the last five years.

Oliver had a sudden inspiration, which seemed to spring from the depths of his heart. He would give Annette the pleasure of hearing the performance. Then he remembered that the Countess's mourning would prove an obstacle, and he set himself to think out some scheme for evading this difficulty. Only one solution presented itself. He would take a stage-box, the occupants of which would be almost invisible, and if the Countess still declined to be of the party, the Count and the Duchess should chaperone Annette for him. In this case he would have to offer the box to the Duchess. And then he would be obliged to invite the Marquis. Unable to make up his mind, he was a long time thinking it over.

It was obvious that the marriage was a foregone conclusion; probably even the date of the ceremony had been settled. He divined the Countess's impatience to have the affair concluded, and he realised that she would bestow her daughter on Farandal with the least possible delay. And he was helpless. He could do nothing to prevent, alter or delay this horrible thing. Since he could not but submit, were it not wiser to endeavour to master his soul, conceal his

sufferings, appear resigned, and never again allow himself to be swept away, as he had been just now, by his passionate resentment? Very well, he would invite the Marquis, allay the Countess's suspicions, and at the same time pave the way for a friendly reception later on in the house of the young couple.

Immediately after luncheon, he went to the Opera House to engage one of those boxes which are screened by the drop-curtain. He was successful, and he hurried away to see the Guilleroys.

Almost at once the Countess appeared. Still deeply affected by the tender scene of the previous afternoon, she exclaimed:

"How good of you to come again to-day!"

"I have something for you," he faltered.

"What is it?"

"A stage box at the Opera, for Helsson's and Montrosé's one and only appearance this season."

"Alas, dear friend! You forget that I am in mourning."

"Yes, but it's nearly four months now."

"I really cannot possibly go."

"And Annette? She may never have such a chance again."

"But who could take her?"

"The Duchess and her father. I will invite them both, and I intend to ask the Marquis too."

She looked deep into his eyes, while her lips quivered with a wild desire to kiss him. She could hardly believe her ears.

"The Marquis?"

"Why not?"

She accepted his proposal with alacrity.

"Is the date of the marriage fixed?" he asked with a careless air.

"Yes, more or less. We have our own reasons for wishing to hurry it on; after all, it was decided upon before Mamma's death. You remember, don't you?"

"Yes, perfectly. When is it to be?"

"Why, at the beginning of January. Forgive me for not having told you before."

Annette entered the room.

His heart gave a violent leap, as if a powerful spring had been released, and all the affection that impelled him towards her suddenly became embittered, and begat within him that curious and passionate hostility to which love changes under the lash of jealousy.

"I have got something for you," he said formally.

"So you have quite made up your mind to say '*vous*,'" she pouted.

He assumed a paternal air.

"Listen, my child, I have been let into a secret; I know all about the great event. I shall really have to get into the habit sooner or later, and better now than afterwards."

She gave a little shrug of annoyance, while the Countess sat silent, her eyes gazing into the distance, but her mind ever on the alert.

"What have you got for me?" asked Annette.

He told her all about the performance and his invitations. She was overjoyed, and with girlish impetuosity she threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him on both cheeks. Almost fainting at the butterfly touch of that small, sweet mouth, he realised that he would never recover from his infatuation.

The Countess drew herself up.

"You know your father is waiting for you."

"Yes, Mamma. I am just going."

Off she ran, still blowing kisses to Oliver as she left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Oliver said:

"Are they going to travel?"

"Yes, for three months."

"So much the better," he murmured, involuntarily.

"We will pick up the threads of the old life again," said the Countess.

"Indeed, I hope so," he faltered.

"In the meantime, do not neglect me."

"No, indeed, dear friend."

His transport of tenderness at the sight of her tears on the previous day, his proposal to invite the Marquis to his box at the Opera, had revived in the Countess a faint gleam of hope.

It was shortlived. Within a week, she was noting with jealous and agonising vigilance each successive stage of the sufferings revealed upon his face. Nothing escaped her, for she herself was enduring all the torments, which she divined in him, and the continual presence of Annette brought home to her every moment of the day the hopelessness of her efforts.

Her years and her bereavement, everything conspired to crush her. Her instinct for dress, so keen, so subtle, and ingenious, was frustrated by that eternal black, which emphasised her pallor and her altered looks, while it lent a brilliance to her daughter's youthful bloom. How remote, and yet how recent, were those days of Annette's return to Paris, when she had proudly insisted upon that studied similarity of dress, which at that time was all in her favour! Now she was seized with a furious desire to tear from her body these trappings of death, whose disfiguring effect was such torture to her. If only she were conscious of having at her command all the resources of elegance and fashion, if only she could select for her adornment delicate shades of colour which would blend with her complexion and invest her expiring charms with a studied appeal, no less potent than the unconscious graces of her child, she might still have contrived to surpass her in fascination. She was so well aware of the intoxicating effect of sumptuous evening dresses, of the sensuous appeal of those clinging and voluptuous morning gowns, the distracting négligée, in which a woman may entertain her friends at luncheon, and which surrounds her, till midday, with a hint of intimate mysteries, an almost palpable suggestion of the warm couch from which she has just arisen and of her perfumed bedchamber.

But what scope was there in these sepulchral garments, this penitential garb, to which she was condemned for a year? For a year, a whole year, she must endure, baffled and helpless, her imprisonment in this detested black. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, for the space of twelve months, she would feel herself ageing beneath that shroud of crape. What would she be like in a year's time, if her poor afflicted body remained a prey to all these agonies of her soul? These ideas continued to haunt her, blighting every enjoyment, changing into pain every possible pleasure, spoiling every delight, every solace, every distraction. She was for ever quivering with a frenzied desire to shake off this crushing burden of misery. For had it not been for this harassing obsession, she could still have been so happy, so full of life and health. She felt that she possessed a heart as young as ever, a fresh and loving and vivid soul, all the ardour of a girl on the threshold of life, an insatiable craving for happiness keener even than in the old days, and a consuming desire to love.

And now, one by one, all the joys, all the exquisite and romantic graces of life, that adorn and render it desirable, were ebbing from her, because she had grown old. It was all over. And yet she could still feel within her all the tender emotions of her girlhood, all the passionate transports of her youthful maturity. Nothing about her had grown old, except her miserable body, her flesh, her skin, the outer garment which clothed the structure of her bones and which was gradually becoming faded and worn, like the covering on a wooden chair. The consciousness of her waning beauty haunted her till it seemed almost a physical pain. This fixed idea of hers produced a positive sensation upon her skin, as if she could feel old age creeping over her, like a wave of cold or heat. She actually believed that she could feel, like a vague irritation, the gradual development of wrinkles upon her forehead, the sagging of the tissues of cheek and throat, the multiplying of those countless little lines, which mar the smoothness of the faded skin. Like

the victim of some fell disease, who cannot leave his festering sores alone, her consciousness, her horror of this swift, this abominable, this meticulous work of time, instilled in her a morbid desire to confirm her fears by continual glances at the mirror. It fascinated her, beckoned to her, exercised an irresistible attraction, forced her to gaze and gaze, to acknowledge, to trace with her finger, as if to convince herself, the indelible ravages of the years. At first the thought recurred intermittently whenever she caught, at home or abroad, the gleam of that formidable crystal surface. She would stop to look at herself in shop-windows, as if a hand held her fast before those glittering sheets of glass. It became at last a feverish obsession. She carried in her pocket a dainty little powder box of ivory, no bigger than a nut, with a tiny looking-glass concealed inside the lid, and often, as she went along, she would hold it open in her hand and raise it to her eyes.

When she sat down to read or write in the tapestried drawing-room, her mind, though distracted for a moment by its new pursuits, would speedily return to its fixed idea. She fought against it, endeavouring to divert her thoughts and to resume her former occupations. But it was all in vain; the craving would return, and presently the book or pen would drop from her hand, which would steal gradually and irresistibly towards the little mirror in the antique silver setting that lay upon her writing table. From the embossed oval frame her face looked out like a face of bygone days, an 18th century portrait, a pastel whose once vivid colours had faded in the sun. After gazing at herself for a long time, she would lay the mirror down on the table with a weary gesture, and return to her task, but before she had read two pages or written a dozen lines, she was seized again with the same irresistible desire, and again she stretched out her hand for the mirror. She was always playing with it, as one fidgets with some knick-knack, till it becomes an irritating trick. Even when her friends were with her she kept glancing at it, and all the time she was toying with it,

she hated it like a living thing. One day she was worked up to such a pitch of irritation at this duel between her and that crystal fragment that she hurled it against the wall, where it was shattered to pieces.

But some days later, her husband who had had the glass renewed, brought it back to her brighter than ever. She had to accept it with a semblance of gratitude, and to resign herself to keeping it. Every morning and every evening, in the privacy of her room, she pursued, in spite of herself, her minute and patient examination of those odious and insidious ravages. When she went to bed she could not sleep; she would light a candle and lie with wide open eyes, reflecting that insomnia and worry would inevitably accelerate the horrible devastations of hurrying time. In the silence of the night, she listened to the pendulum of the clock, whose monotonous, regular ticking seemed to murmur, "Passing, passing, passing," till her heart was convulsed with such agony that she had to draw the sheet over her mouth, to stifle her groans of anguish.

Once, like everyone else, she had had a vague idea of the lapse of the years and of the changes they would bring. Like everyone else, every winter, every spring, every autumn, she would admit to herself:

"I have changed a great deal since last year," but as she retained her beauty, though with a difference, she did not trouble her head about it. But now, instead of calmly acquiescing in the leisurely progression of the seasons, she had all at once discovered and realised the terrifying flight of the mere moments. Suddenly it had been brought home to her, this speed of the fleeting hour, this imperceptible passing of time, so appalling to contemplate, this endless procession of brief, hurrying moments that consume the lives and bodies of men.

After such nights of misery, she would be visited by long spells of drowsiness, as soon as her maid had drawn back the curtains and lighted the morning fire. She would lie there, between the warm sheets, weary and relaxed, betwixt

sleeping and waking, in a state of mental lethargy, which permitted the revival of that providential instinct of hope, which preserves till the end of his days the heart within man's breast and the smile upon his lips.

Every morning, when she rose from her bed, she was seized with an imperious desire to pray, to beseech God for a little succour and comfort. Throwing herself upon her knees before a large oaken crucifix, Oliver's gift, a fine piece of work, which he had found for her, with closed lips, in that voice of the soul, wherewith one communes with oneself, she invoked the martyred Deity in sorrowful supplication. Distracted with her yearning to be heard and comforted, ingenuous in her trouble, like all the faithful who fall on their knees before their God, she could not but feel that He heard her, that He would give ear to her prayer and perhaps be touched by her sufferings. She did not implore Him to do for her what He has done for no one, to leave her till her dying day her bloom, her charm, her grace. All that she asked of Him was a little peace, a little respite. She knew that she must grow old just as she knew that she must some day die. But why so soon? Some women preserved their beauty for many years. Could He not grant her this boon? What mercy, if He who had likewise suffered so much would grant her only for two or three more years just so much beauty as would enable her still to attract and charm. She did not utter these desires in words, but they were expressed in her inarticulate moans, the vague appeal of her sorrowing soul.

Then, rising from her knees, she would seat herself at her dressing-table, and with the same ardent concentration with which she had prayed, would create with her powders, face-creams, crayons, and powder-puffs, an enamelled beauty, fragile and fictitious.

VI

THE Boulevards were ringing with the names of Helsson and Montrosé, which were repeated with ever-increasing frequency as one neared the Opera House. Enormous posters on the Morris columns flaunted them in the eyes of the passers-by, and the evening air was humming with expectation. The massive building, known as "The National Academy of Music," crouching beneath a gloomy sky, presented to the crowds gathered in front of it the dubious whiteness of its pretentious façade and the marble colonnades of its gallery, which was illuminated like a stage by a system of concealed electric lights.

The traffic in the square was controlled by mounted constabulary, and from every corner of Paris hundreds of carriages came driving up, their lowered windows revealing glimpses of light-coloured, filmy gowns and white faces. Broughams and landaus drew up in line under the arcades reserved for them, halting for a few moments to discharge their freight of ladies of society or of the demi-monde, in evening cloaks trimmed with fur, feathers or priceless lace: exquisite femininity divinely arrayed.

The famous staircase presented a fairy-like scene; a continuous stream of women robed like queens, with long flowing trains, with diamonds flashing from bosoms and ears, ascended the steps. At an early hour every seat in the hall was filled, for the audience were anxious not to lose a single note of the two famous singers. The whole vast amphitheatre, flooded with dazzling electric light, was thronged with people settling into their seats amid the confused hum of many voices.

The stage box was already occupied by the Duchess, Annette, the Count, the Marquis, Bertin and Monsieur de Musadieu. From it were visible only the wings, where there was much talking and shouting and running to and fro on the part of scene-shifters in overalls, men in evening dress and actors in costume. But from the other side of the great lowered drop-scene came the deep murmur of the crowd; it suggested the presence of a restless multitude in a state of intense excitement, which seemed to filter through the curtain and fill the stage.

The opera was Faust.

Musadieu was relating anecdotes of the first performances of this work at the Théâtre Lyrique; the dazzling triumph which succeeded its first partial failure; the original interpreters and their particular way of singing each song. Half-turned towards him, Annette listened with that eager and youthful interest with which she surveyed the whole world, and now and then she bestowed upon her fiancé, so soon to be her husband, a tender glance. She loved him now after the way of the young and innocent; that is to say, she loved in him all her hopes for the morrow. The intoxication of life's first revels and the ardent longing for happiness made her quiver with joyful anticipation. In full knowledge and understanding, Oliver remained in the background, enveloping the pair in the gaze of a man in torments. In his hopeless jealousy, he had descended step by step into the abyss of secret love, until he had reached the burning centre of human anguish, where the heart seems to hiss like flesh on glowing embers.

Three warning raps were heard, then the crisp little tap of the first violin's bow on the desk, and every movement, every cough, every whisper were at once suppressed. After a short profound silence, the opening bars of the Overture flooded the hall with the invisible, irresistible mystery of music, music which surges through the human body, bewitching the nerves and the soul with a magic at once poetic and sensuous, and mingling the sonorous waves we hear with the limpid air we breathe.

In his seat at the back of the box, Oliver was painfully affected, as if the wounds in his heart had been touched by those rhythmic notes.

The curtain rose. He straightened himself and looked upon Faust meditating in his alchemist's laboratory.

Oliver had seen the opera a score of times and knew it almost by heart; and soon his attention wandered from the stage to the auditorium. From behind the framework of the stage which screened his box, he could see only a little corner, which lay, however, between the orchestra and the pit and presented to his view a whole section of the audience, many of whom he recognised. The rows of men in white ties in the stalls were like an exhibition of familiar faces: artists, men of the world, journalists, representatives of the classes who never miss a society function. He commented mentally on all the women he knew in the balcony stalls and in the boxes. The Countess de Lochrist was looking enchanting, while a recent bride, the Marquise d'Eberlin, was already enjoying the attention of various opera-glasses.

"A good beginning," thought Oliver to himself.

The audience was listening with deep attention and evident sympathy to the lamentations of the tenor Montrosé.

"How absurd it is!" said Oliver to himself. "There is Faust, sublime, mysterious Faust, singing about the horrible futility and emptiness of everything, while that crowd is anxiously wondering if Montrosé's voice is as good as ever."

He too began to listen, and behind the commonplace words of the libretto, through the medium of the music, with its power to quicken profound perceptions in the depths of the soul, he received, as it were, a revelation of Goethe's conception of the heart of Faust. In other days he had read and greatly admired the poem, but he had never been deeply moved by it. Now, all of a sudden there had flashed upon him an intuition of its unfathomable depths. That evening, he felt as if he himself were changed into a Faust.

Leaning slightly forward over the edge of the box, Annette was listening with heart and soul. Murmurs of delight went

round the hall: Montrosé's voice was surer in pitch, richer in tone than ever.

Oliver had closed his eyes. For the last month he had made everything he saw, everything he felt, everything he experienced, minister to his passion. He sacrificed the whole world and himself as well to nourish his obsession. Everything he saw that was beautiful or precious, every charming idea that occurred to him, he at once mentally laid at the feet of his little friend, and there was never a thought in his head that he did not at once associate with his love.

Deep within him he heard the echo of Faust's lamentations and he was seized with a longing for death, a longing to have done with his sorrow, with all the misery of his barren passion. As he studied Annette's delicate profile, he saw that the Marquis de Farandal, who was seated behind her, was similarly occupied. He felt old, worn out, utterly forlorn. Ah, the intolerable agony, to have nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for, deprived even of the right to cherish desire, to feel ousted, excluded from life, like a superannuated official, whose career is at an end!

There was an outburst of applause. Montrosé was already enjoying a triumph. Then Labarrière, as Mephistopheles, sprang out of the ground.

Oliver had never heard him in this part and his interest was recaptured. His recollections of Aubin's dramatic bass, of Faure's seductive baritone, distracted him for a few moments. But suddenly a phrase, sung with irresistible appeal by Montrosé, stabbed him to the heart

"Grant me that treasure which contains all else,
O grant me youth,"

sang Faust to Satan. Whereupon the tenor was suddenly revealed, young and handsome, in silken doublet and plumed cap, a sword by his side, with all the airs and graces of a popular singer. There was a murmur of applause. He was very good-looking and all the ladies were charmed with him. Oliver, however, felt a pang of disappointment; the poignant

appeal of Goethe's tragedy was weakened. The rest of the opera was no more to him than a fairy tale, full of charming airs, and played by clever actors, whose voices alone engaged his attention. He took a dislike to the hero in the silken doublet, the pretty fellow of trills and shakes, who was equally proud of his thighs and his voice. This was not Faust, the sinister, the irresistible cavalier, the seducer of Marguerite.

His excitement had subsided. The phrase he had just heard returned to his memory:

"Grant me that treasure which contains all else,
O grant me youth."

He hummed it to himself, he echoed it sorrowfully in the depths of his soul. With his eyes on Annette's fair head, framed in the rectangle of the box, he felt all the bitterness of unattainable desire.

Montrosé brought the first act to a close with a masterly perfection, which evoked a frenzy of enthusiasm. For several minutes the hall resounded with the thunder of applause, stamping of feet, cries of bravo. All the women in the boxes were clapping their gloved hands, while the men, standing behind them, were shouting and applauding. Twice the curtain rose and fell without any diminution of the enthusiasm. After it had fallen for the third time, shutting off the stage and the inner boxes from the auditorium, the Duchess and Annette went on clapping for a few more moments and were rewarded by the tenor with a discreet little bow all to themselves.

"Oh, he saw us," cried Annette.

"What a fine artist!" exclaimed the Duchess.

Oliver leaned forward, and with mingled disgust and contempt watched the singer disappear into the wings, swaying a little as he moved, pointing his toes and resting his hand on his hip, in the traditional attitude of the stage hero.

Everyone began to talk about him. He was as much renowned for his conquests as for his voice. He had visited

every capital in the world, and had been rapturously welcomed by all the women, who were aware beforehand that he was irresistible, and whose hearts began to beat as soon as he appeared on the stage. But it seemed that he troubled his head very little about this orgy of sentimentality and contented himself with his musical triumphs. In language discreetly veiled on Annette's account, Musadieu described the handsome tenor's private life. Carried away by the enthusiasm for this distinguished and fascinating man, who was at the same time so admirable a musician, the Duchess expressed her sympathetic approval of all the acts of folly which he inspired.

"Really, who could possibly resist a voice like that?" she concluded laughingly.

Oliver was annoyed, and remarked bitterly that he really could not understand how anyone could be infatuated by a wretched mountebank, continually representing types of humanity which were never his own, and impersonating imaginary heroes; by a painted mannikin of the footlights who would play any part you pleased at so much a night.

"Oh, you're jealous," cried the Duchess. "All you artists and men of the world are always down on actors, because they are more successful with the ladies."

She turned to Annette.

"Now, child, you're on the threshold of life and you look at things with unspoilt eyes. What do you think of Montrosé?"

"Why, I think he is perfectly charming," replied Annette with conviction.

Again the three warning raps were heard, and the curtain rose on the second act, the scene of the village fair.

Helsson sang her part to perfection. She also seemed to have developed greater power and flexibility of voice. She had definitely taken her place as the great, the supreme, the exquisite prima donna, whose fame throughout the world equalled that of Bismarck and Lesseps.

When Faust darted towards her, singing in his bewitching voice the charming lines:

"O lady mine, sweetest of all and rarest,
Take thou my hand as on thy way thou farest,"

and fair-haired Marguerite, so lovely and so touching, replied:

"No lady, sir, nor beautiful am I.
My home I'll find without your company,"

a deep thrill of delight passed through the house.

When the curtain fell, the applause was overwhelming, and Annette went on clapping, till Bertin longed to seize her hands and make her stop. His heart was racked by new torments. All through the interval he never uttered a word. The old obsession was merged in loathing for this detestable singer, who had turned the child's head. His thoughts pursued Montrosé even to the privacy of his dressing-room and watched him renewing the paint upon his cheeks.

The curtain rose on the scene in the garden. Immediately the whole house seemed enveloped in a feverish atmosphere of love. Never before had this music, tremulous as a murmur of kisses, found two such interpreters. They were no longer the famous singers, Montrosé and Helsson, but two beings from an ideal world, or more ethereal still, two disembodied voices, the eternal voice of man who loves, the eternal voice of woman who surrenders. In their sighs lay all the poetry of human passion.

"Let me gaze, let me gaze," sang Faust, and the notes issued from his lips with such an expression of adoration, such a transport of entreaty, that a desire for love was aroused for a moment in every heart. Oliver remembered how he had murmured those very words in the park at Roncières under the windows of the château. Until that evening he had always thought them rather commonplace, but now they sprang to his lips like the expiring appeal of passion, the last invocation, the last hope, the last grace he could look for in this life.

Then suddenly he neither listened nor heard. He was

convulsed by an appalling pang of jealousy, for he saw Annette raising her handkerchief to her eyes. She was weeping. Her heart was awaking, stirring, throbbing, that little girlish heart of hers, as yet so innocent. There she sat, close beside him, with never a thought of him, thrilling at the revelation of the power of love over the human heart. And this revelation, this initiation, she owed to the singing of that wretched mountebank.

Ah! He no longer resented Farandal, fool that he was, devoid of insight, knowledge and understanding. But how deeply he loathed that creature in tights, who was illuminating Annette's young soul. He wanted to seize upon her, as on someone about to be knocked down by a runaway horse, to catch her by the arm and urge her, drag her hence, to say to her, "For God's sake, come away, come away."

How she listened! How she quivered! And he, how he suffered. He had suffered before, but never so cruelly. He could recall his former anguish, for every jealous pang repeats itself, like an old wound breaking out. It began at Roncières, coming back from the cemetery, when he felt for the first time that she eluded him, that he had no influence over this child, who was as independent as a young animal. Down there, when she vexed him by running off to gather flowers, his chief emotion was a savage impulse to check her gambols and to keep her physically near him. But to-day it was her very soul that fled out of his reach. Ah! that gnawing pain, which he had at last come to understand. How often he had felt it, in all those little indefinable hurts which inflict bruise after bruise upon the lovesick heart. He recalled all the pains of petty jealousy attacking him with tiny stings all day long. Whenever Annette had looked at a thing with admiration, pleasure or desire, he had felt jealous of it; he had felt jealous, imperceptibly but incessantly jealous of everything that made a claim upon her time, her glances, her attention, her gaiety, her curiosity, her affection, for it all seemed to deprive him of a little of herself. He had felt jealous of everything she did without him, of everything about her of which he knew nothing, her comings and

goings, the books she read, all the things that gave her pleasure. He had felt jealous of a certain officer, wounded in heroic circumstances in Africa, who had been the talk of Paris for a week; of the author of a much admired novel; of an obscure young poet, whom she had never seen, but whose verses Musadieu quoted; in short of every man who was mentioned with approval, however casually, in her presence. For when a man is in love with a woman, it is intolerable anguish to feel that she is bestowing upon another even a semblance of interest. He has an imperious desire to be the one and only person in her world. He would have her blind, deaf, insensible to everyone but him. As soon as he sees her turning to look at someone, he tries to intercept her glance, and if he cannot divert her attention to himself and monopolise it entirely, his whole soul is in agony.

Such were Oliver's sufferings, confronted with this singer, who seemed to reap throughout the hall a harvest of love of his own sowing, and he was furious with the whole audience, with the enraptured women in the boxes, and the men who were fools enough to contribute to the apotheosis of this mountebank.

An artist! That fellow an artist! That was what they called him, an artist, a great artist. This buffoon, who was merely the interpreter of another man's ideas, enjoyed a triumph such as no creative artist had ever achieved. What an admirable instance of the justice and intelligence of fashionable society, of these conceited and ignorant amateurs for whom the masters of human art toil to the end of their days. He watched them ecstatically shouting and applauding, and the hostility of the self-made man, the old resentment always latent in the depths of his arrogant heart, became a furious rage against those imbeciles who were all-powerful by sole virtue of their birth and their possessions.

He preserved a brooding silence until the end of the performance. When the final storm of applause had at last subsided, he offered his arm to the Duchess, while Annette took that of the Marquis. They went down the great staircase, in the midst of a stream of men and women, pouring

down the steps like a slow magnificent cascade of bare shoulders, sumptuous gowns and black dress coats. The Duchess, Annette, her father, and the Marquis all drove away together in the landau, leaving Oliver Bertin and Musadieu alone together in the Place de l'Opéra.

Oliver was seized by a sudden affection for his companion, or rather by that instinctive friendliness with which one regards a fellow-countryman in a foreign land. He was feeling lost in that crowd of careless strangers, while to Musadieu he could still talk about Annette. He took his arm.

"Don't go home yet," he said. "It's a fine night. Come for a turn."

"Delighted."

They strolled towards the Madeleine, in the midst of the midnight throng, that issues from the theatres and fills the streets with brief and feverish tumult. Musadieu was bubbling over with ideas on all the current topics of conversation, which Bertin called "his menu for the day," and he let his flow of eloquence play upon the two or three subjects which particularly interested him. Oliver took his arm, and without listening to him, let him ripple on. He knew that he could presently bring him to talk about Annette, and he walked straight ahead with unseeing eyes, in the grip of his passion. He was utterly exhausted by the paroxysms of jealousy, which had shaken him like a severe fall; he felt overwhelmed by the knowledge that life held nothing more for him.

With nothing to hope for, he would have to endure these ever-increasing torments. He would have to live through day after day of utter emptiness, watching her from afar, as she led her own life, happy and beloved, and doubtless loving in her turn. A lover! Perhaps, like her mother, she too would have a lover. He was conscious of such untold and complicated sources of suffering within him, such accumulations of sorrows; such inevitable torments; he felt so utterly forlorn, henceforth so irretrievably lost in an abyss of unimaginable agony that he could not believe that anyone

had ever before endured such misery. And he was suddenly struck by the childishness of the poets, who had invented the toils of Sisyphus, the physical thirst of Tantalus, the ravaged heart of Prometheus. Oh, if they could have foreseen, if they could have analysed an old man's despairing passion for a young girl, in what words would they have described the abominable and secret throes of one too old to be loved, the tortures of barren desire and the anguish that could be inflicted by a fair-haired girl, more terrible than any vulture,—as she tore to pieces an aged heart.

Musadieu went on talking, till Oliver interrupted him, his obsession prompting him to remark, almost involuntarily:

"Annette was looking charming this evening."

"Yes, delightful."

To prevent Musadieu from picking up the threads of his interrupted discourse, Oliver continued:

"She is prettier than her mother used to be."

Musadieu agreed somewhat absently, his attention not yet attracted by this new subject.

Oliver, however, made an effort to keep him to the point, cunningly appealing to Musadieu's predilections:

"After her marriage," he continued, "she will have one of the first salons in Paris."

This was successful. The Inspector of the Fine Arts, that inveterate man of the world, began to discourse learnedly upon the position to which the Marquise de Farandal would be entitled in French society.

As Oliver listened, he had a vision of Annette in a spacious, brilliantly lighted drawing-room surrounded by guests of both sexes. Even this imaginary glimpse roused his jealousy. They were now walking along the Boulevard Malesherbes. As they passed the Guilleroys' house, Oliver looked up. Behind the closed windows light was filtering through chinks in the curtains. A suspicion flashed upon him that the Duchess and her nephew had been invited to come in for a cup of tea. He was seized with a spasm of rage, which caused him agony. He was still holding Musadieu's arm, and by occasionally contradicting him, he drew

him out on the subject of the future Marquise. Musadieu's placid tones, as he discussed her, conjured up her image, which hovered about them in the surrounding night.

They reached the door of Oliver's house in the Avenue de Villiers.

"Won't you come in?" Oliver asked.

"No, thanks, it's late. I'm going home to bed."

"Oh, do come in for half-an-hour, and we'll go on with our talk."

"No, really, it's too late."

After all the fresh shocks he had endured, Oliver was filled with horror at the idea of remaining alone. He had hold of someone, and he meant to keep him.

"You must come in; you shall choose one of my sketches. I have been intending to give you one for a long time."

Reflecting that painters are not always in a generous mood and that a memory for promises is seldom long, Musadieu seized his chance. As Inspector of Fine Arts, he possessed a gallery of pictures which he owed to his tact and diplomacy.

"Thank you, I'll come in," he said.

They entered the house.

Oliver woke up his servant, who brought them pegs, and for some time the conversation turned on painting. Bertin showed his sketches and invited Musadieu to select the one he liked best. Distracted by the gaslight, which made it difficult to judge the tone values, Musadieu lingered over his choice. In the end he decided upon a group of little girls skipping on the pavement, and having made his choice he was anxious to carry off his spoils immediately.

"I will send the sketch in the morning," said the painter.

"No, thanks. I want it to-night, so that I can admire it before going to bed."

All further attempts to detain him were in vain, and once more Oliver remained alone in his house, which was to him a torture chamber of painful memories.

The next morning when the servant came into his room with the early tea and the newspapers, he found his master sitting up in bed and looking alarmingly pale.

"Aren't you feeling well, sir?" he asked.

"It's nothing. Only a little neuralgia."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. What sort of a day is it?"

"It's raining."

"Thank you. That will do."

The man placed the tray and the morning papers on a small table and left the room.

Oliver took up the *Figaro* and unfolded it. The leading article was headed "Modern Painting." It was a dithyrambic eulogy of four or five young artists, who were gifted with a real sense of colour, but who went to extremes for the sake of effect and claimed to be original and revolutionary geniuses. Like all the older men, Oliver detested these arrogant newcomers and combated their theories. He began reading the article with the rising irritation which is so quickly provoked in a jaded mind. A few lines further down the page he caught sight of his own name coupled with words which struck him like a blow on the chest: "The antiquated art of Oliver Bertin." He had always been sensitive both to blame and praise, but in spite of his justifiable vanity and in consequence of his own natural diffidence, the pain he suffered from hostile criticisms had, in his heart of hearts, more than balanced the pleasure he derived from eulogies.

But formerly, in his palmy days, the censer had been so freely swung, that it had rendered him insensible to pin-pricks. Nowadays, however, by reason of the never ending outcrop of new artists with new adherents, appreciation of his works had become rarer and disparagement more pronounced. He felt that he had been relegated to the ranks of out-of-date painters, who were not without talent, but whom the new men did not regard as masters, and as he was as intelligent as he was discerning, he suffered from the slightest insinuations as keenly as from direct attacks.

Yet no other wound to his pride had ever struck home so deeply. Panting for breath, he re-read the article, in order to grasp its slightest implications. With careless insolence,

he and several of his contemporaries were consigned together to the scrap-heap. He sprang up from his chair, muttering with quivering lips:

"The antiquated art of Oliver Bertin."

A feeling of sadness and desolation, a sense of the end of things, the end of his physical and mental activities, plunged him into such depths of despair as he had never before experienced. Till two in the afternoon he sat in an armchair, with his legs stretched out in front of the fire, without the strength to move, incapable of the slightest exertion. Then a longing for consolation came over him, a longing to feel the pressure of loyal hands, to gaze into faithful eyes, to be pitied, comforted and soothed with loving words. As usual, he betook himself to the Countess.

When he entered the room, Annette was alone in the drawing-room, standing with her back towards him, addressing an envelope. On the table beside her lay an open copy of the *Figaro*. The same glance that showed him Annette revealed to him the newspaper, and he stood rooted to the spot with dismay. Supposing she had read it!

She turned round. Preoccupied with a thousand feminine cares, she exclaimed hurriedly:

"Oh, how do you do, dear Master? Forgive me for running away. But the dressmaker is waiting for me upstairs. You know what an important person a dressmaker is, when one is going to be married. But I will lend you Mamma. At present, she's deep in discussion and arguments with the expert. But if I want her I'll borrow her from you again for a few minutes."

She left the room with a little run to show what a hurry she was in.

Her sudden departure, without one word of affection, one tender look for him who loved her, loved her so unspeakably, overwhelmed him. Once more his glance fell on the *Figaro,* and he thought to himself:

"She must have read it. Everyone is laughing at me and despising me She doesn't believe in me any more. She thinks nothing of me now."

He took two steps towards the newspaper, as if he were striding up to a man to box his ears. Then he thought to himself:

"After all, I daresay she hasn't read it. She is so full of her own concerns. But this evening at dinner it is sure to be discussed and then she will want to read it."

With a sudden unreasoning impulse, he took the paper, folded it and slipped it into his pocket with the dexterity of a thief.

The Countess entered the room. One glance at Oliver's livid, distorted face told her that he had reached the limits of human suffering. She yearned towards him with all her grief-stricken soul, racked like his own, with all her agonised body, tortured even as his.

Throwing her arms about his neck, and gazing deep into his eyes, she exclaimed:

"Oh, how unhappy you are!"

This time he did not deny it. With his throat working convulsively, he faltered:

"Yes . . . yes . . . yes."

Feeling that he was about to burst into tears, she drew him into the darkest corner of the drawing-room, where two armchairs stood hidden behind a little screen of antique silk. Behind this frail barrier of embroidery, in the grateful gloom cast by a cloudy day they took refuge. Full of pity for him, wrung by the sight of his agonies, she murmured:

"My poor Oliver, how terribly you are suffering!"

He laid his white head on his friend's shoulder:

"More than you could believe possible," he muttered.

"Oh, I know," she exclaimed in a voice of infinite sadness. "I felt it. I watched it strike root and grow."

"I could not help it, Annie," he replied, as if she had blamed him.

Turning towards him, she gently pressed her lips to Oliver's eyes and felt them wet with bitter tears. She shuddered as if she had drunk a drop of sheer despair, and she murmured again and again:

"Oh, my poor friend, my poor friend."

After a moment's silence, she added:

"It is the fault of our two hearts, which have never grown old. My own feels so terribly alive."

He tried to speak, but his sobs choked him. She could hear the convulsions that racked his bosom as it lay against her own. Seized once more by the selfish agonies of love that had tormented her for so long, she cried, in the heart-broken tones which witness to some terrible calamity:

"My God, how you love her!"

"Ah, yes, I love her," he confessed once more.

She thought for a few moments and then resumed:

"And me, did you never love me like this?"

He made no attempt to deceive her. It was one of those hours when the whole truth is told.

"No," he faltered, "in those days I was too young."

"Too young?" she exclaimed in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Life was too sweet. It is only at our age that one loves with the violence of despair."

"Is your feeling for her anything like the feeling you had for me?"

"Yes and no . . . and yet is is practically the same thing. I loved you as much as it is possible to love a woman. And I love her, as I loved you, because she is yourself. But this love has now become a destructive irresistible passion, stronger than death. It devours me as the flames devour a burning house."

All her pity was suddenly consumed by the parching breath of jealousy.

"My poor friend," she said consolingly, "in a few days she will be married and gone away. When she is out of sight, I am sure you will soon recover."

He shook his head.

"Ah, no! I am lost, utterly lost."

"No, no. Don't say that. You will not see her for three months. That will be long enough. Three months were long enough for you to learn to love her more than me, whom you had known for twelve years."

"Annie," he implored her from the depths of his misery, "do not abandon me.'"

"What can I do, dear friend?"

"Do not leave me to myself."

"I will come and see you as often as you like."

"No, let me be here as much as possible."

"You would be near her."

"And near you."

"You ought not see her again before her marriage."

"Oh, Annie!"

"Or at all events very seldom."

"May I stay here this evening?"

"No, not in the state you are in. You must try to distract your thoughts; go to the club or the theatre, or anywhere, but you must not stay here."

"I implore you."

"No, Oliver, it's impossible. Besides I have some people coming to dinner, whose presence would only increase your distress."

"The Duchess . . . and . . . that man?"

"Yes."

"But I spent yesterday evening with them."

"Exactly. And much good it did you."

"I promise to be perfectly calm."

"No, it's impossible."

"Then I had better go."

"Why hurry away?"

"I want to walk."

"That's right. Take a long walk. Keep on walking till nightfall, till you are utterly worn out, and then go straight to bed."

He had risen from his chair.

"Good-bye, Annie."

"Good-bye, dear friend. I will come and see you to-morrow morning If you like I'll be thoroughly indiscreet, as in the old days, and make a pretence of lunching here at twelve and lunch with you at quarter past one. Shall I?"

"I wish you would. How kind you are."

"It's because I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Oh, don't talk of that."

"Good-bye, dear Annie."

"Good-bye, dear friend, till to-morrow."

"Good-bye."

He kissed first one hand, then the other, then her temples and the corners of her mouth. His eyes were dry now, and he wore an air of determination. As he was leaving the room, he caught her to him and folded her in his arms, and pressing his lips to her forehead, he seemed to absorb, to breathe in, all her love for him.

Then without another look, he hurried from the room.

As soon as she was alone, the Countess sank into a chair and burst into tears. She would have remained there till nightfall, had not Annette suddenly come to look for her. To gain time to attend to her red eyes, the Countess said:

"I must first write a little note, my dear. Go upstairs and I will join you in a minute."

The rest of the afternoon she had to devote to the serious matter of her daughter's trousseau.

The Duchess and her nephew were dining quietly with the Guilleroys. They had just sat down to table and were still discussing the performance of the previous evening, when the butler entered with three huge bouquets.

"Good gracious, what's all this?" cried Madame de Mortemain.

"Oh, aren't they lovely!" exclaimed Annette. "Who can have sent them?"

"Probably Oliver Bertin," replied her mother.

Ever since he left her, he had remained in her thoughts. He had seemed to her so despondent, so tragic; she could enter so fully into his hopeless sufferings, which recoiled so torturingly upon herself; she loved him so deeply, so tenderly, so devotedly, that her heart was crushed under gloomy forebodings.

The Countess was right. To each of the bouquets was attached one of Oliver's cards, on which he had pencilled

respectively the names of the Countess, the Duchess and Annette.

"Is he ill, your friend Bertin?" asked the Duchess. "I did not think he was looking at all well yesterday."

"Yes, I am a little anxious about him," replied Madame de Guilleroy, "although he does not complain of anything."

"It's only that he's growing old like the rest of us," said her husband. "In fact, he is ageing very rapidly just now. And I always think that bachelors go to pieces all of a sudden. They seem to break up more quickly than we married men. He really has changed a great deal."

"True," sighed the Countess.

Farandal broke off a murmured conversation with Annette to remark:

"There were some very disagreeable things about him in an article in the *Figaro* this morning."

Every attack or criticism on her friend's art, every unfavourable allusion, put the Countess beside herself.

"Oh," she cried, "men of Oliver Bertin's standing need not worry their heads about such impertinence."

"What, an unpleasant article about Oliver?" exclaimed Guilleroy in surprise. "I never saw it. On what page was it?"

"On the front page; a leading article headed 'Modern Painting.'"

"That explains it," replied Guilleroy, no longer surprised. "I didn't read it because it was about painting."

A smile went round the table. Everyone knew that Monsieur de Guilleroy took very little interest in anything outside politics and agriculture.

They turned to other subjects until they adjourned to the drawing-room for coffee.

Haunted by her anxiety about Oliver, the Countess took no part in the conversation and hardly even replied when directly addressed. Where was he now? Where had he dined? Where was he wandering, with that mortal wound in his heart? She bitterly regretted now that she had sent him away, and had not let him remain. She pictured him

roaming the streets, unhappy, aimless, solitary, goaded onwards by his sorrows. Tortured by vague fears and presentiments, she hardly said a word, until it was time for the Duchess and her nephew to take their departure. Then she went to bed, and lay thinking of him, her eyes wide open in the darkness.

A long time had elapsed, when she thought she heard a ring at the front door. She sat up with a start and listened. Again the bell echoed shrilly through the night.

She jumped out of bed, and violently pressed the electric bell to summon her maid. Then seizing a candle, she hurried into the hall.

"Who is there?" she asked, through the door.

"Someone with a letter," replied an unknown voice.

"A letter? From whom?"

"A doctor."

"What doctor?"

"I don't know. There has been an accident."

Without further hesitation, she opened the door and saw a cab-driver in his glazed hat standing on the threshold. He handed her a note. She read the inscription:

"Very urgent. The Count de Guilleroy."

She did not know the writing.

"Come in, my man," she said, "and sit down and wait."

When she reached her husband's door, her heart was beating so violently that she could not utter a sound. She beat against the wooden panels with her metal candlestick, but the Count was fast asleep and did not hear her. Then, frantic with impatience, she kicked at the door, until at last a drowsy voice replied:

"Who's there? What's the time?"

"It's I," she answered. "There's an urgent letter for you; a cab-driver has just brought it. There has been an accident."

In a voice muffled by the bedcurtains he said:

"Wait. I'll get up. I'm just coming."

A minute later he emerged in his dressing-gown. At the same time two servants, who had been roused by the ringing

of the bells, hurriedly appeared, in bewildered alarm at the sight of a strange man seated in the dining-room.

The Count had taken the letter and was turning it over and over in his fingers muttering:

"What on earth can it be? I can't imagine."

"For heaven's sake, read it!" she exclaimed in a fever of impatience.

He tore open the envelope, unfolded the letter and uttered an exclamation of dismay. Then he gazed at his wife with a look of horror in his eyes.

"Good God, what is it?" she cried.

He was so overwhelmed that he could hardly speak.

"Oh, a terrible thing," he stammered. "A terrible thing! Bertin has been run over."

"Dead?" she cried.

"No, no," he replied. "Here, read it yourself."

She snatched the letter from his hands.

"Dear Sir,

Our friend, Monsieur Oliver Bertin, the famous artist, has met with a serious accident. He was knocked down by an omnibus and one of the wheels passed over his body. I cannot express a definite opinion as to the consequences of the accident, which may not be serious, but may equally well prove immediately fatal. Monsieur Bertin entreats you and the Countess to come to him at once. I trust that you will both comply with this request of our friend, who may have breathed his last before the morning.

Yours faithfully,
D. DE RIVIL."

Wide-eyed with horror the Countess gazed at her husband.

Then suddenly, as if she had received an electric shock, she was visited by a thrill of that essentially feminine courage which in hours of terror can turn a woman into the most heroic of created beings.

Turning to her maid, she said:

"Be quick, I'm going to dress."

"What will you put on, Madam?"

"Anything. It doesn't matter. Jacques," she continued, "be ready in five minutes' time."

With her whole soul convulsed, she was returning to her room, when she caught sight of the driver, who was still patiently waiting.

"Is your cab here?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Very good, we will take it."

Then she hurried to her room.

With feverish haste she threw on some clothes, fastening buttons, hooks and tapes at haphazard; then standing in front of the mirror she bundled up her hair, for once without a single thought for the pale face and haggard eyes reflected there. Flinging a cloak round her shoulders, she darted into her husband's room. He was not quite ready, but she dragged him away.

"You most come," she said. "Remember he may die at any moment."

Utterly bewildered, the Count stumbled after her, groping his way down the dark staircase, and feeling with his foot for each step, to avoid a fall.

Not a word was uttered during the short drive. The Countess was trembling so violently that her teeth chattered; through the windows she saw the flares of the gas street lamps swim past, all misty with rain. The pavements were gleaming, the Boulevards deserted; the night seemed full of foreboding. When they arrived at Oliver's house, they found the outer door open and a light burning in the porter's empty room.

At the top of the staircase they were met by Dr de Rivil, a dapper little man, short and stout, with greyish hair and polished manners. He bowed low to the Countess and shook hands with the Count.

Panting, as if the effort of climbing the stairs had exhausted all the breath in her body, she gasped:

"Well, doctor?"

"Well, Countess, I hope it will prove less serious than I had thought at first."

"Then, he won't die?" she cried.

"No. At least I think not."

"Can you answer for it?"

"No. I can only say that I hope it is merely a case of simple contusion of the abdominal muscles, without any internal lesions."

"What do you mean by lesions?"

"Lacerations."

"How do you know that he has escaped such injuries?"

"I am merely assuming it."

"And supposing you are mistaken?"

"Oh, then it would be a serious matter."

"He might die?"

"Yes."

"Very suddenly?"

"Very suddenly; in a few minutes, or even in a few seconds. But we may hope for the best, Countess. I feel sure that he will be perfectly well again in a fortnight."

She listened to him with the deepest attention, trying to understand and grasp the whole situation.

"What sort of lacerations do you mean?"

"Well, let us say of the liver."

"And that would be very dangerous?"

"Yes. But I should be surprised now if any complications were to develop. Come and see him. It will do him good. He has been expecting you with the utmost impatience."

When she first entered the room, she beheld only a colourless face against the white pillow. The light of the candles and of the fire on the hearth, threw his profile into relief, accentuating the shadows upon it, and in that livid countenance she could see his eyes watching her as she approached. All her courage, energy and resolution deserted her, for that face, so hollow-cheeked and wasted, was the face of a dying man. Her friend, from whom she had parted but an hour ago, had become this dread object, this terrifying spectre.

"Oh, my poor friend," she faltered.

"It's nothing," he whispered without moving his head.

As she gazed at him, she was appalled by the change in him. He was as pale as if he had been drained of every drop of blood. His hollow cheeks seemed to be sucked inwards, and his eyes were sunk, as if they were drawn into his head by a thread.

Seeing her horror, he murmured with a sigh:

"A pretty state I'm in."

Still looking at him intently, she asked:

"How did it happen?"

He made a desperate effort to speak, and at times his whole face was convulsed with nervous spasms.

"I was not looking where I was going . . . I was thinking of something else . . . something quite different . . . quite different . . . and I was knocked down and run over by an omnibus."

As she listened to him, the whole scene flashed upon her mind. Sick with horror, she said:

"Did you lose much blood?"

"No. I am only a little bruised and crushed."

"Where did it happen?"

"I hardly know," he replied in a faint voice. "It was a long way from home."

The doctor drew up an armchair for the Countess, who collapsed into it, while the Count stood at the foot of the bed, muttering through his clenched teeth:

"Poor fellow . . . Poor fellow . . . What a terrible business!"

He was very fond of Oliver and he was genuinely and deeply distressed.

"But where did it happen?" the Countess repeated.

"Personally, I know hardly anything about it," replied the doctor. "In fact, I can't make it out at all. According to the cab-driver who brought him home, it was near the Gobelins, right on the outskirts of Paris. He picked him up at a chemist's in that neighbourhood, where he had been taken about nine o'clock."

Leaning down to Oliver he said:

"Is it correct that the accident occurred near the Gobelins?"

Bertin closed his eyes, as if in an effort of memory.

"I don't know," he replied.

"But where were you going?"

"I don't remember. I was walking straight ahead."

A moan which she could not repress escaped the Countess's lips. Almost suffocated by her emotion, which left her breathless for some moments, she drew her handkerchief from her pocket and pressing it to her eyes, burst into a passion of tears.

It was all clear to her. Her heart felt crushed beneath an intolerable weight of remorse. Why had she not kept Oliver with her that evening, instead of driving him out into the streets to fall, dazed with his sorrow, beneath those fatal wheels?

In that strange toneless voice of his, he said:

"Don't cry. You break my heart."

With a tremendous effort of the will, she checked her sobs, withdrew her handkerchief, and without a tremor on her face, let her wide eyes rest on him, while her tears fell slowly, one by one.

Neither stirred. With their hands clasped together on the sheet, they gazed at each other. Oblivious of the presence of their companions, they looked in each other's eyes, and their glances communicated superhuman emotion from heart to heart.

In that swift, mute, terrible communion, they recalled all their memories of the past, all their love, crushed to death, even as Oliver himself, all the emotions that had thrilled them both, everything in their lives that had been mingled and blended by the transport of passion, which had made them one.

They gazed at each other and their lips trembled with an irresistible desire to utter all those sad and secret things which were craving utterance. She felt that at all costs she must send away the two men who were hovering in the

background, that her woman's wit must hit upon some plan, some stratagem. With her eyes ever fixed on Oliver, she sought for an expedient.

The doctor and the Count were talking in undertones and discussing what was to be done for the patient.

She turned to the doctor:

"Did you bring a nurse?"

"No, I would rather send a house-surgeon from the hospital, who would be better qualified to watch the case."

"Send both. One cannot be too careful. Can you arrange for them to come to-night? I don't suppose you will be able to stay here yourself till the morning."

"That is so. I am going home now. I have been here four hours already."

"But on your way home, will you send us a nurse and a surgeon?"

"That's rather difficult in the middle of the night. But I'll do my best."

"It is absolutely necessary."

"They may promise to come, but whether they really will is another matter."

"My husband shall go with you and see that they come."

"But you, Countess, you cannot possibly stay here alone."

"Why not?" she cried, and her voice had a ring of defiance, of indignant protest against any opposition to her will. With unquestionable authority, she explained the exigencies of the situation. It was necessary to secure within the next hour the services of a surgeon and nurse, to guard against every possible contingency. And the only thing was to drag them from their beds and bring them by main force. Only her husband could do this. In the meantime, she would remain with the patient, as was her duty and privilege. She would be simply fulfilling the office of a friend and a woman. In any case, such was her determination, and no one could move her from it.

They had to acknowledge that her proposal was reasonable, and to obey her instructions. Burning with impatience to have them out of the way, so that she could be

alone with Oliver, she had risen to her feet. Then, to avoid making any mistake while they were away, she listened attentively to the doctor's instructions, eager to grasp and impress upon her memory every detail. Oliver's valet, who was standing by her, was likewise listening, while his wife, Bertin's cook, who had helped with the first dressings and was hovering in the background, kept nodding her head to show that she, too, fully understood the doctor's directions.

When the Countess had repeated all his instructions like a lesson learned by heart, she urged the two men to be gone.

"But be as quick as you can, as quick as you can," she said to her husband.

"Come in my brougham," said the doctor to the Count. "That will be the quickest way. You will be back within the hour."

Before he left, the doctor examined the patient carefully, to assure himself that his condition remained satisfactory. Guilleroy still demurred:

"You do not think it unwise of us to go?"

"No. There is no danger. All he needs is rest and quiet. Madame de Guilleroy will see that he does not talk, and she herself will talk as little as possible."

The Countess was horrified.

"What, I musn't talk to him?"

"On no account. Take an armchair and remain near him. Then he will not feel lonely and it will be good for him. But he musn't tire himself with talking, or even with thinking. I will come round again to-morrow morning about nine o'clock. Good-bye, Countess."

With a low bow, he left the room, followed by the Count, who said:

"Don't worry, my dear. I will be back within an hour, and then you can go home."

After they had left the room, she listened till she heard the house-door close behind them and the wheels of the brougham as it drove away. The two servants were waiting for orders. She dismissed them both.

"Go to bed. I will ring if I want anything."

They left the room and she remained alone with Oliver. She returned to the bed side and leaned against it; then she laid her hands on the pillow, one on either side of that beloved head, and she stooped down to gaze at him. With her lips so close to his face, that she seemed but to breathe the words; she murmured:

"Did you throw yourself under the wheels?"

Again he tried to smile.

"No," he replied, "the thing hurled itself at me."

"I don't believe you. It was your own doing."

"No, it was that wretched omnibus."

After some minutes of silence, a silence in which their two souls seemed to mingle in their eyes, she murmured:

"Oh, my dear, dear Oliver, to think that I let you go, that I did not keep you with me."

"It was bound to happen, one day or another," he replied with conviction.

And still they looked into each other's eyes, each seeking to divine the other's most secret thoughts.

"I don't think I shall get over this," he continued. "The pain is too great."

"You are suffering terribly?" she faltered.

"Yes, terribly."

Bending lower, she breathed upon his forehead, his cheeks, his eyes, soft lingering kisses, ethereal as a tender thought, barely touching him with her lips, and with that little catch of the breath of children when they kiss. She did this for a long, long time, and he lay passive beneath these exquisitely delicate caresses, which seemed to soothe and refresh him, for the convulsive movements of his face subsided.

"Annie," he said presently.

She interrupted her kisses to listen to him.

"Yes, dear?"

"You must promise me one thing."

"Anything you like."

"If I am not dead before to-morrow morning, swear to bring Annette to see me, once, just once. I would give any-

thing to see her once more before I die. Think . . . by . . . this time . . . to-morrow . . . I may have . . . closed my eyes for ever. . . . And I shall never see you again, . . . neither you . . . nor her."

"Oh, hush, hush!" she cried, stricken to the heart. "Yes, I promise to bring her."

"You swear it?"

"Yes, I swear it, dear friend. But be still. You must not talk; you hurt me so. Be still."

A sudden spasm convulsed his features. When it had subsided, he said:

"If we have only a few moments to be together, let us not waste them. Let us spend them in saying farewell. I have loved you so dearly."

"And I," she sighed, "how deeply I still love you."

"You have been my one happiness in life," he continued. "It is only these last days that have been bitter, . . . and that was not your fault. . . . Ah, my poor Annie, . . . how sad life can be . . . and how difficult it is to die."

"Hush, Oliver, I implore you."

He did not listen to her but continued:

"What a happy man I should have been if you had never had a daughter."

"For God's sake, Oliver, hush!"

But he seemed to be thinking aloud, rather than talking to her.

"Ah!" he sighed, "whoever invented this life and created man, must have been either very blind . . . or very cruel."

"Oliver, I implore you. If you ever loved me, be still. Do not talk like that."

He glanced at her as she leaned over him; her face as livid as his own, as if she too were dying, and he held his peace.

She sank into the armchair, which was drawn up close to the bed, and again she took Oliver's hand, as it rested on the sheet.

"I forbid you to talk any more now," she said. "Just lie still and think of me, as I am thinking of you."

Once more they gazed at each other, motionless, linked together by the clasp of their burning hands. She kept gently pressing the palm that lay within her own, and he replied by slightly closing his fingers. Each little pressure had a meaning, each one recalled some moment of the vanished past, each stirred within them the slumbering memories of their passion. Each was a secret question, each a mysterious answer; piteous answer, piteous question, the appeal of the old love. In this tragic tryst, destined perhaps to be their last, their spirits retraced the vanished years and the whole course of their passion, while all was silent in the room, save for the crackling of the fire on the hearth.

Suddenly, as if awakening from a dream, he exclaimed with a start of horror:

"Your letters!"

"My letters!" she echoed.

"Yes. Suppose I had died without destroying them."

"Oh, never mind!" she cried. "As if it mattered. Anyone may find them and read them for all I care."

"No, I won't have it," he replied. "Get up, Annie. Open the bottom drawer of my big writing-table. They are all there, every one of them. You must take them and throw them all into the fire."

She did not move, but sat there rigid, as if he had urged her to some base act.

"Annie, I implore you," he resumed. "If you won't do this, you will put me in agony; you will drive me distracted. Suppose they fell into someone's hands, a lawyer's, a servant's, or even your husband's. I won't have it."

Still hesitating, she rose to her feet.

"No," she cried, "it's too hard, it's too cruel. I feel as if you were forcing me to burn both our hearts."

With his face distorted with anguish, he pleaded with her. At the sight of his sufferings, she yielded and went to the writing-table. Opening the drawer, she saw that it was full to the brim with a mass of letters, heaped one upon the other, and on every envelope she recognised the address

which she had written so often. These two lines—one containing a man's name, the other that of his dwelling—were as familiar to her as her own name, as familiar as words can be which have stood for all the hope and happiness in life. She gazed at them, those little squares of paper, once blank, which through the medium of a little ink now contained all the love she had tried to express, all that she had wrested from herself and bestowed upon Oliver.

He attempted to turn his head on the pillow to watch.

"Be quick and burn them," he said again.

At that she seized two handfuls of letters and held them for a moment. They felt to her heavy with sorrow, packed with emotion, in this hour, which was the end of all the exquisite things she had felt and dreamed. They were soul of her soul, heart of her heart, essence of her passionate self—these letters that she held in her hand, and she remembered with what ecstasy, with what rapture some of them had been written, in all the intoxication of living, of loving, of lavishing her love.

"Burn them, Annie, burn them," repeated Oliver.

With a simultaneous gesture of both hands, she flung the two packets into the fire, where they were scattered among the blazing logs. She snatched another handful from the drawer, and threw them on the first heap, and then another and another, stooping down and springing to her feet with hasty movements, so as to complete as soon as possible her horrible task.

When the whole contents of the drawer had been transferred to the fire, she stood there waiting, watching the flames, which at first were almost choked, as they crept up the sides of that pyre of envelopes. They licked the edges, flickered around the corners, ran along the margins, went out, caught again, and spread. Soon the white pyramid had a bright girdle of red fire all round it, which filled the whole room with light; and this light, that fell upon the woman standing there and upon the man lying prostrate, was their love, committed to the flames, their love turning to ashes.

The Countess turned round, and in the dazzling brightness

of that blaze she saw Oliver leaning his haggard face over the edge of the bed.

"Are they all there?"

"Yes, every one of them."

Before she returned to the bedside, she cast one last glance at her work of destruction and saw on the pile of papers, already half consumed, twisting and turning black, a trickle of red, which looked like drops of blood. It seemed to come from the very heart of the letters, of each separate letter, as from a wound, and it crept slowly towards the flames, leaving behind it a crimson trail.

The Countess felt a shock of supernatural horror. She started back as if she had witnessed a murder. Then she suddenly realised that this thing that she had seen was only the melting of the sealing-wax.

She returned to Oliver, and, tenderly lifting his head, laid it back upon the pillow. But he had moved and his change of position had brought on a violent attack of pain. His face was convulsed with agony; he was panting for breath and seemed no longer conscious of her presence.

She waited for the paroxysm to subside, for him to open his tightly closed eyes, and speak one word more to her.

"Are you in great pain?" she said at last.

He made no reply.

She leaned over and touched his forehead to force him to look at her. At that he opened his eyes, but their gaze was wild and wandering.

"Are you in great pain?" she cried in terror. "Oliver. Answer me. Would you like me to call someone? . . . Make an effort. . . . Speak."

She thought she heard him falter:

"Bring her . . . you have sworn it."

His body writhed beneath the bedclothes, and his face was distorted.

"Oliver! . . . My God!" she cried again. "Oliver, what is it? Would you like me to call someone?"

This time he heard her.

"No, . . . it's nothing," he answered.

The paroxysms seemed actually to subside, and his sufferings to diminish, till suddenly he lapsed into a drowsy lethargy. Hoping that he would fall asleep, she seated herself beside the bed, took his hand again and waited. He lay still with his head sunk upon his breast, while through his parted lips his breath came in short gasps, which seemed to rasp the throat. Now and then his fingers moved with little convulsive jerks, at which the Countess shuddered to the roots of her hair. It was no longer that conscious pressure which, in place of the weary lips, had told all the sorrows of their hearts, but uncontrollable spasms that spoke only of the torments of the body.

She could have screamed with terror, abject terror. She was seized with a panic-stricken longing to escape, to ring or call for help; but she dared not move, lest she should disturb his rest.

The distant noise of carriages passing along the streets penetrated through the walls, and she kept listening for the wheels to stop at the door, and her husband to return and deliver her at last from this ghastly vigil.

When she endeavoured to draw her hand away from Oliver's, his grasp tightened and he gave a deep sigh. At that she resigned herself, for fear of exciting him.

Choked by the black ashes of the letters, the fire on the hearth was dying down; two of the candles were flickering out; a chair suddenly creaked. The whole house was still, still as death, save for the tall Flemish clock on the stairs, which chimed through the night the hour and the quarters, proclaiming, in all its different modulations, the onward march of time.

The Countess sat motionless, while intolerable fear crept over her soul. Nightmare fancies beset her; frightful thoughts oppressed her mind; she thought she could feel Oliver's fingers growing cold within her own. Could it be? No. Impossible. Then whence this sensation of an indescribable and icy contact? Beside herself with terror, she rose to look at Oliver's face.

He lay relaxed, impassive, inanimate; careless of suffering; suddenly enfolded in the peace of Eternal Oblivion.